



University of Essex

# Cultural Freelancers Study 2024

Commissioned by Arts Council England



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**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

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# Foreword

# Foreword

The cultural sector is strongest when the individuals who work in it are able to do what they do best: create. We celebrate the work of creative and cultural practitioners in *Let's Create*, Arts Council England's ten-year strategy, and outline our commitment to support practitioners across the sector to learn, take risks, fail where necessary, and finally to flourish in pursuit of making new work. The great artists, performers, writers, and curators of 2040 and 2050 need to be nurtured now: our investment in them is, at heart, an investment in a future that we believe can be brighter and better with creativity and culture at its core.

We want to be confident that the Arts Council has a comprehensive understanding of freelancers' experiences of working in the sector. In summer 2023, we therefore commissioned the University of Essex to conduct our first Freelancers Study.

This report, which quantifies the anecdotal stories we have been hearing for a number of years, makes for sobering reading. The challenges to the freelance community – of burnout, of leaving, or for the next generation, of not joining the cultural sector at all – are clear. I hope this report compels those of us with agency to take action – and to take action fast.

We appreciate that this study could not have happened without the practitioners who have completed the survey and taken part in the focus groups and interviews it is based on, providing valuable insights about the lives and experiences of creative and cultural practitioners in England. The findings will inform our own thinking and, we hope, that of other policymakers, employers, freelancers, freelancer networks and other bodies that support them. It will also form a baseline from which we can track how things are changing in the sector over time, with the next survey taking place in three years' time.

It is important to acknowledge that this study is not the first of its kind, and that other networks and organisations have led the way in surveying freelancers to understand their experiences, particularly as we emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic. This latest study into the freelance workforce is our most wide-ranging study of this part of our ecology. It is intended to build upon existing findings and to provide a consistent level of insight into all our supported artforms and disciplines: combined arts, dance, libraries, literature, museums, music, theatre, and visual arts. This is the first study to allow for direct comparison and contrast between disciplines. It will help us to understand where issues and experiences are shared, and where they are unique to a particular discipline.

The data from the 5000+ survey responses is rich and deep. While this report covers the key trends and findings, the data allows readers to explore and examine findings in detailed and specific ways. We have produced an anonymised data set in a dashboard that can be interrogated on Arts Council England's website. Users are able to filter the data to explore responses from particular groups or to see how different groups answered the same question. We hope that this will be a valuable resource for individuals, cultural organisations, funders, and policy makers to make evidence-based decisions to improve support for freelancers. We welcome you to share your thoughts, ideas and responses to the survey data and its findings with us at [individuals@artscouncil.org.uk](mailto:individuals@artscouncil.org.uk)

Alongside this report, we are publishing a literature review on Arts Council England's website of existing research into freelance conditions. Producing this literature review was the first phase of the study, intended to enable us to add to – rather than duplicate – the available research on creative and cultural practitioners. We encourage you to also read the literature review to understand the work that has come before.

It is clear that while there are many positive aspects of working freelance in the culture sector, practitioners across all our supported disciplines are facing major challenges. The twin impacts of the pandemic and rising cost-of-living have affected the whole sector but are often felt most acutely by freelancers, who are navigating the same issues with less security, and often lower incomes, than their employed counterparts. In particular, the study has highlighted that practitioners from under-represented backgrounds are finding it harder to maintain a career in the sector, and that there is still much more progress required to achieve a fully inclusive sector.

It is also clear that we still have work to do to make sure that the Arts Council's processes and communications are simpler, and transparent, and that there is a desire for us to play a role in setting and enforcing standards across the sector. We also acknowledge the desire from freelancers for us to play a role in improving standards such as pay rates. While some of this is beyond our remit, we hear this ask and are committed to playing our part in creating a better future in where freelancers can flourish.

'Increasing our support for Individuals' was one of five themes in our 2021–2024 Delivery Plan, recognising the need for more dedicated support and the particular impact of the Covid-19 pandemic upon practitioners.

Work under this theme included:

- refreshing National Lottery Project Grants to make it easier for individuals to apply for funding;
- increasing the annual budget and individual maximum grant awards for Developing your Creative Practice;

- setting out good practice for organisations working with freelancers and encouraging National Portfolio Organisations to adopt it;
- research into the training and development needs of freelancers, and signposting to relevant opportunities;
- commissioning Freelance: Futures, a programme of learning and events focused on creating equitable working conditions for freelancers;
- developing and publishing the Arts Council’s ‘Consulting with Creative and Cultural Practitioners’ policy.

We will use the findings of this study to help us develop interventions to improve the working lives of creative and cultural practitioners and will introduce these over the next few years. However, this is not work we can do alone. We must build a shared ambition across the sector – supported by all those who work within it and who fund and support it – to improve the experience and conditions for the freelancers upon whom the sector so clearly relies.

We will share the study and its findings with national and local government, other funders, unions and trade bodies, networks, funded organisations, and Arts Council staff, using our convening powers and existing relationships to bring together those needed to make change. We will work with the relevant organisations, groups and networks who are already making progress in improving conditions for freelancers. And we will, of course, include freelance practitioners in those conversations, to ensure that interventions are developed with and for freelancers.

**Darren Henley,**  
**Chief Executive, Arts Council England**

# Executive Summary

# Executive Summary

This report is based on a study of creative and cultural freelance workers in England. It was carried out by independent researchers at the University of Essex on behalf of Arts Council England. It aimed to document the current challenges and opportunities experienced by creative and cultural practitioners in England working across the Arts Council's funded disciplines. It also establishes a dataset which forms a baseline to which future research will return. The study will be repeated every three years, gathering longitudinal data about the lives and experiences of freelancers. The intention was to generate a resource for Arts Council England, creative and cultural practitioners, and organisations that represent freelancers and advocate on their behalf.

The study comprised three parts:

- A literature review of relevant research.
- An online survey of current and former freelancers which received over 5,000 responses. The survey covered a range of topics, such as: demographic information (including caring responsibilities and education levels), types of work and working hours, income and income sources, freelancers' skills needs, access to representation and funding, diversity and inclusion, and experiences from those who no longer freelance in the culture sector.
- 27 focus groups and 53 one-to-one interviews with 200 freelancers selected from survey participants who signed up to take part.

Participants in the survey and focus groups were representative demographically and were reflective of the full breadth of Arts Council England supported artforms and disciplines: combined arts, dance, libraries, literature, museums, music, theatre, and visual arts.



## 1. The distinctive nature and experience of freelance work in the sector

69% of current freelancers who responded to the survey work only/mainly as a freelancer, while 29% combine freelance work with salaried work. Freelancers value the freedom and autonomy offered by freelance work in the creative and cultural sector, but for the majority of freelancers, working on a freelance basis is their only option. The creative and cultural sector relies heavily on freelance labour<sup>1</sup> due to the way in which work in the sector is organised and funded (i.e. often in a short-term, project-based manner), and equivalent salaried opportunities are extremely limited.

Survey respondents highlighted a range of challenges faced by creative and cultural freelancers, including: chronic financial precarity, low pay, late payment, insecure and unpredictable income streams and workflows, poor contracting practices, lack of recognition for work, providing unpaid additional hours to deliver projects, and the process of applying for and securing funding.

Freelancers felt that the low pay, poor working conditions, and lack of recognition they often experienced were part of a wider picture of freelancers' contributions to projects being devalued.

## 2. Pay, income and financial support

73% of freelancers who took part in the survey report pre-tax earnings of less than £25,000 per annum from their freelance work, despite significant numbers of freelancers holding graduate and post-graduate qualifications which would usually command higher pay levels. Low pay is seen as a further indication of the lack of value of freelancers' skills. Numerous freelancers report being offered rates of pay below Union or Government minimums.

Many freelancers report that their income does not cover their living expenses and household bills, which is further impacted by the increased cost of living and the residual effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit. Pay often does not include or cover necessary travel expenses, which creates barriers for freelancers who have to travel to access work (particularly to London) or who live in remote areas with limited transport options. It also limits their ability to save money to cover sick pay or parental

<sup>1</sup> In 2022 13% of the UK workforce overall was self-employed [UK self-employment rate 2022 | Statista](#)

leave, and to save for a pension with 68% of survey respondents saying they are not able to save for a work-related pension.

Freelancers highlight that 'mid-career' freelancers often hit an 'income wall' (i.e., their earnings do not increase in line with their skills and experience), meaning that they leave the sector to find better and more secure income.

### 3. Voice, representation and recourse

60% of freelancers who took part in the study reported that they are not members of a union. This is mostly because they were either unaware of unions that served freelancers in the sector or because they felt they were ineffective. For some, it was off-putting or prohibitive to pay union fees out of their already low incomes.

Those who are members of unions shared positive experiences, recognising and appreciating the role they play in increasing awareness of the needs of particular groups, such as people with disabilities.

Despite relatively low levels of union membership, freelancers are concerned about a general lack of representation. They acknowledge the importance of professional networks and communities, but also recognise that this often requires unpaid or 'donated' time and work from freelancers. Freelancers highlighted the need for more influential advocacy and financial support for advocacy organisations.

### 4. Development and progression

Freelancers highlighted a range of issues in relation to career development and progression, in particular identifying a need to develop legal and contractual knowledge, including pay and contract negotiations. 70% of current freelancers felt that support (such as mentoring, advice, supervision) is not available when they need it.

81% of freelancers reported that they found out about work opportunities through personal recommendations, and 56% through repeat bookings, corroborating concerns that it is difficult to find and access work opportunities if you are not already connected to networks, or if you come from an under-represented background.

Concerns about 'stagnant pay' and a lack of pay progression were also raised. When former freelancers were asked why they had left the culture sector, the majority of respondents reported that it was for financial reasons.

Others reported that they left the culture sector because of issues relating to equality, inclusion, and accessibility; for example, due to the challenges of being a single parent while working as a freelancer, or ongoing challenges related to age or disability.

## 5. Equality, inclusion and accessibility

Just under half (47%) of all current freelancers reported thinking that the creative and cultural sector is 'not very' or 'not at all' inclusive, however this figure is considerably higher amongst people from certain under-represented backgrounds. Freelancers reported a wide range of issues and experiences as contributing to these perceptions, including being subject to discrimination, harassment, and stereotyping. Some shared examples of 'best practice' experiences that organisations could adopt. See Section 9 of the full report for more detail.

A related, widespread concern is that financial inequalities combined with other barriers to accessing work for working-class and Black, Asian and ethnically diverse freelancers perpetuate a social and cultural elitism across the sector. Issues of concern to freelancers include a relative lack of access to social networks, the effects of social and cultural stereotypes, and language/accent related barriers as well as social networks where many jobs are found.

23% of survey respondents identified as deaf or disabled, or as having a long-term health condition. These respondents reported experiencing 'stigma or lack of understanding' and challenges related to the pace, intensity and network demands of freelance work in the sector. Neurodivergent freelancers highlighted difficulty in navigating bureaucratic systems and traditional workplace structures.

## 6. Mental health and wellbeing

Freelancers reported a wide range of challenges which impact on their mental health, including a lack of work-life balance, fatigue, anxiety and despondency. These are directly related to the insecurity and unpredictability of work in the sector, and the tendency for freelancers to have to overcommit or overwork. A number of freelancers with serious mental health conditions explained how the stresses associated with the precarity and challenges of freelance work frequently exacerbate their condition.

Poor working conditions have a significant impact on freelancers' mental health, as do experiences of workplace discrimination, bullying and unequal treatment. Some freelancers also highlighted the fear of repercussions and reputational impact of

speaking out against poor practice or behaviours and the related impact of this on their mental health.

Building social networks, seeking peer support, and discussing issues openly are seen as valuable strategies for coping with the pressures and challenges of freelancing, such as dealing with rejection and the often competitive nature of the sector, particularly for those in the performing arts. Freelancer networks are seen as essential for social and professional support.

## 7. Freelancers as a professional community

A widespread view is that arts organisations should be encouraged and supported in playing a more proactive role in cultivating positive working environments and cooperative cultures. Some freelancers feel that advocacy organisations should be better supported to mediate this relationship more effectively, for instance by providing some form of accreditation, recommendation or approval process, or by 'endorsing' organisations that are reported as 'freelancer friendly'.

## 8. The wider context of freelance work in the sector

There are a range of factors that impact the wider context in which freelancers are operating:

**State funding for culture and the arts:** Many freelancers acknowledged that state funding for culture and the arts has reduced in real terms since 2010, and they felt that funding cuts have disproportionately impacted on grassroots arts venues, and on arts education especially. Many expressed concerns about the effects of a purely economic evaluation of the value of art, saying that purely economic models ignore the value of art and creative work as a social good.

**Covid-19 and beyond:** Most freelancers in the study said that they are continuing to feel the impact of the pandemic, due to it exacerbating pre-existing issues, or the difficulties they faced in accessing financial support. The impact of the pandemic on venues is also reported to have a knock-on impact on freelancers; for example, slow audience recovery seemingly causing venues to become more risk-averse, or organisational adjustments due to the pandemic (such as reduced staffing) remaining in place. Freelancers did acknowledge that the shift to online working and reduced travel has benefited some, particularly those with a disability or long-term condition or those with parenting and/or caring responsibilities. The rise in grassroots activism,

peer networks, and advocacy groups that grew out of the pandemic were also highlighted as a positive.

**Brexit, migration policy and visas:** Freelancers felt that the changes in UK government policy on awarding visas to non-UK nationals and the complexity of UK nationals acquiring visas and work permits to work across the EU are problematic. Events scheduling is difficult due to the '90 day rule' and makes UK freelancers less attractive to EU employers. It has also become increasingly unviable for UK companies to provide sets and other sector-related goods and services for EU-based productions, and vice versa. There are concerns about talent development and workforce pipelines due to the decreased number of Higher Education students from EU countries taking arts courses.

**The cost-of-living crisis:** Since late 2021, the UK has been facing a cost-of-living crisis. Given the financial precarity most freelancers in the sector experience, many report that their incomes are not enough to cover their outgoings. The cost-of-living crisis is also affecting previously reliable additional income, such as private tutoring, as schools and parents have less money for 'extras'. Younger freelancers or those new to the sector, along with those from under-represented backgrounds or with parenting and/or caring responsibilities, are particularly affected.

**Artificial Intelligence (AI):** A distinct but significant concern for a large number of freelancers is the potential impact of *Artificial Intelligence (AI)* on the sector. Some freelancers are excited about the capabilities AI offers, for instance, for enhancing their work efficiency and creative possibilities. From this perspective, AI is viewed as a potentially valuable tool that might streamline some creative processes. However, other freelancers are concerned about potential job displacement, with companies using chatbots like Chat GPT instead of a freelance copywriter, or loss of creative control and/or artistic integrity. Concerns about the need for legislation to protect rights, for advice and training, and for improved advocacy and support are widespread amongst the freelance workforce across the sector.

## 9. Future plans: 'Freelance not free'

77% of freelancers in the study expect to continue to work in the sector on a freelance basis, whereas only 43% of all freelancers in the study would recommend working as a freelancer in the creative cultural sector. Freelancers have clear ideas about what they, and the sector, need in order to secure a fairer future for all.

## **Fairness**

Freelancers want to see pay and terms and conditions equivalent to those provided for PAYE employees, perhaps through increased accountability from organisations receiving public or charitable funding. They call for organisations to commit to fair pay charters or fee scales. There is also the desire for a 'freelance basic income' or a 'living wage for freelancers' within the sector.

Other suggestions and considerations for implementing fair and inclusive practices in the culture sector include:

- Greater support for hybrid working arrangements.
- Attaching conditions to state funding to promote diversity and inclusion.
- Recognition of, and improved support for, the challenges associated with childcare and other caring responsibilities for freelancers in the creative and cultural sector.
- Advocating for the reduction of working hours across the creative and cultural sector, but particularly in theatre and music.

## **Accountability**

Freelancers believe that Arts Council England has the potential to play a leading role in more effective resource allocation and in securing a more sustainable, equitable, and accessible future for the sector, recognising that legislative change might be necessary to bring this about.

Achieving this includes the following suggestions:

- Stronger mechanisms to compel cultural organisations to engage with existing professional bodies and unions to help freelancers secure improved pay and working conditions.
- Discouraging overly ambitious and underbudgeted projects and establishing and enforcing clear terms and conditions.
- Establishing a complaints and resolutions service for freelancers working with publicly funded organisations.
- Streamlining application processes and redirecting funding to freelancers rather than large organisations.
- Developing early/emerging career schemes which focus on career stage rather than age.
- Providing more detailed feedback about unsuccessful applications alongside offering more developmental and mentoring opportunities for future applications.

## Education

Freelancers strongly advocate for increased investment in arts education and creative opportunities within state schools, highlighting the crucial need for comprehensive accessibility. This would ensure that all students can engage in artistic endeavours, irrespective of their financial circumstances or backgrounds. Freelancers see this as crucial to sustaining not only an informed and appreciative audience for the arts now and in the future but equally for the next generation of freelancers and other creative practitioners.

## Conclusions

The freelancers who took part in this study have shared their experiences, challenges and concerns of working in the creative and cultural sector. They highlighted their serious passion for their work, which they feel is exploited by organisations and funders. This underpins a sector which depends on a financially insecure and relatively unregulated workforce. They reported a need for collective representation, fair remuneration and conditions, and better recognition of the value of their work.

In addition, the study highlights several challenges that, while not necessarily unique to freelancers or to those working in the creative and cultural sector, are experienced in distinct ways by creative and cultural freelancers. Some of these are challenges that might be the exception for other groups of workers but which are widely experienced by freelancers in the sector. This includes an 'overwork-underpayment' bind and a pervasive 'rejection norm' shaping efforts to secure work, both impacting on freelancers' precarity, mental health difficulties, and inequalities across the sector.

# Introduction



# Introduction

This report is based on a study of freelance workers in the creative and cultural sector in England. It was carried out by independent researchers at the *University of Essex* on behalf of *Arts Council England*<sup>2</sup>. The University of Essex researchers are:

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The aim of the study was to document the current challenges and opportunities facing the freelance creative and cultural workforce in England by providing an evidence-based reference point spanning the breadth of Arts Council-funded disciplines.

The intention was to generate a resource for Arts Council England, for creative and cultural practitioners, and for organisations that represent freelancers and advocate on their behalf.

<sup>2</sup> Arts Council England is a non-departmental public body of the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport. It is a registered charity and is the main organisation responsible for funding, supporting, and developing creativity and culture in England.

Moreover, the study also aimed to establish a baseline to which future research will return to provide longitudinal insight into continuities and changes in the opportunities and challenges that freelancers working in the creative and cultural sector experience and to understand their needs and priorities going forwards. Many of the issues raised through this study would benefit from further investigation.

## Methodology

The study was based on a three-part research design, consisting of:

- A **systematic review of relevant literature** drawing on published academic research and other studies across the sector, including those that also provide longitudinal insight into freelancers' circumstances.
- A **large-scale online survey of freelancers across England**, combining quantitative (pre-coded) and qualitative (open text) questions. The survey was open from 1st to 31st October 2023. It generated 5,081 responses, including 167,534 words of free text, and included freelancers working across a range of regions, disciplines, and roles in different circumstances and at a variety of career stages. The survey covered a range of topics, such as: demographic information (including caring responsibilities and education levels), types of work and working hours, income and income sources, freelancers' skills needs, access to representation and funding, diversity and inclusion, and experiences from those who no longer freelance in the culture sector. A list of the questions asked in the survey can be found in [APPENDIX ONE](#).
- **27 focus groups and 53 one-to-one interviews** (total n=200) with freelancers selected from survey participants who signed up to take part. 2656 freelancers signed up (52.2% of the total number of survey participants). Participants were selected from a demographically and disciplinary adjusted sample spanning the full breadth of Arts Council England funded disciplines. Focus groups and interviews took place between 9th October 2023 and 9th February 2024.

Participants in the focus groups and interviews represented the full range of Arts Council England supported artforms and disciplines: combined arts, dance, libraries, literature, museums, music, theatre, and visual arts. The 27 focus groups included two pilot groups as well as the following:

- Freelancers in each of the eight Arts Council England disciplines
- Freelancers in each of the five Arts Council England areas
- Freelancers at early, mid, and advanced career stages
- Freelancers who self-identified as a deaf person or as having a disability and/or long-term health condition

- Freelancers who self-identify as neurodiverse
- Freelancers who are parents and/or carers
- Freelancers who self-identified as being from working-class socio-economic groups
- Freelancers who employ other freelancers
- Former freelancers still working in the sector
- Former freelancers no longer working in the sector
- Twelve participants who supplied their email addresses but chose not to participate in the survey but who had offered to be interviewed.

The full list of focus groups can be found in [APPENDIX TWO](#) and the demographic breakdown of the 200 focus group and interview participants can be found in [APPENDIX THREE](#).

Where the report does not refer to statistics, that is because it is based on conversations that took place in the focus groups and interviews or from responses made in the open text boxes as part of the survey.

The study as a whole focused on freelancers' experiences and views. All participants currently work as freelancers in one of Arts Council England's funded disciplines or have done so previously. A modified version of the UK government's definition of being a freelance worker<sup>3</sup> was used to help potential participants to self-define their work status.

Participants could choose not to complete the survey and to use it solely to sign up to volunteer to take part in a focus group and/or one-to-one interview. Freelancers who were selected to take part in a focus group and/or interview were paid £50 in lieu of their time. These lasted approximately one hour each and were recorded and professionally transcribed, generating just under one million words of transcribed text.

Before committing to take part, all participants were provided with full details of the study, including their rights as participants, enabling them to give informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time if they decided not to complete the survey or to exit a focus group or interview.

3 See <https://www.gov.uk/contract-types-and-employer-responsibilities/freelancers-consultants-and-contractors>

Arts Council England and the University of Essex researchers are very grateful to everyone who participated in the study and who shared their thoughts on it with us directly and more widely.

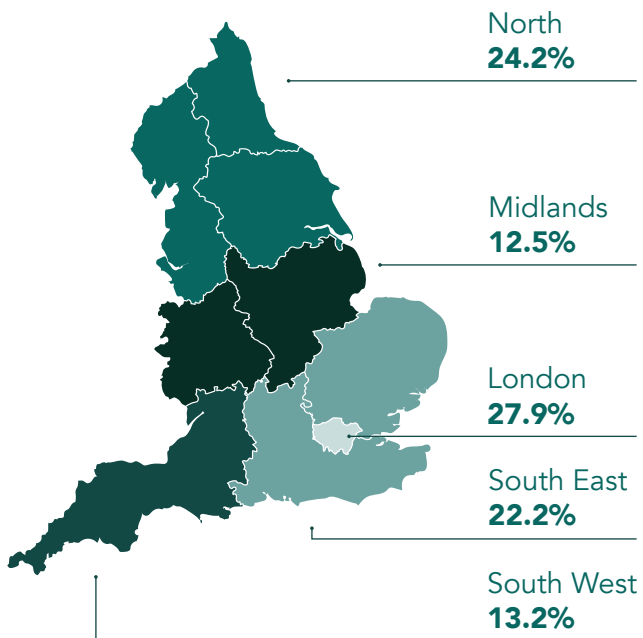
## Participants

It is widely acknowledged that there are significant barriers to access and progression for people from different backgrounds across the creative and cultural sector. It was therefore important for this study to establish a detailed understanding of the experiences of people from different backgrounds and in a wide range of circumstances to inform future policy, planning and decision-making. The complex and variable nature of freelance work in different disciplines, regions and roles means that gaining a full picture of differences and similarities across the sector is vital in order to provide a useful evidence base for freelancers, employers, and professional and funding bodies who support, advise and advocate on their behalf.

Outlined below are details of survey participants' demographic and work groups. (All focus groups and interview participants were selected from the survey, including freelancers who declined to complete the survey itself, but consented to take part in a focus group and/or interview – please see [APPENDIX TWO](#) and [THREE](#) for further details).

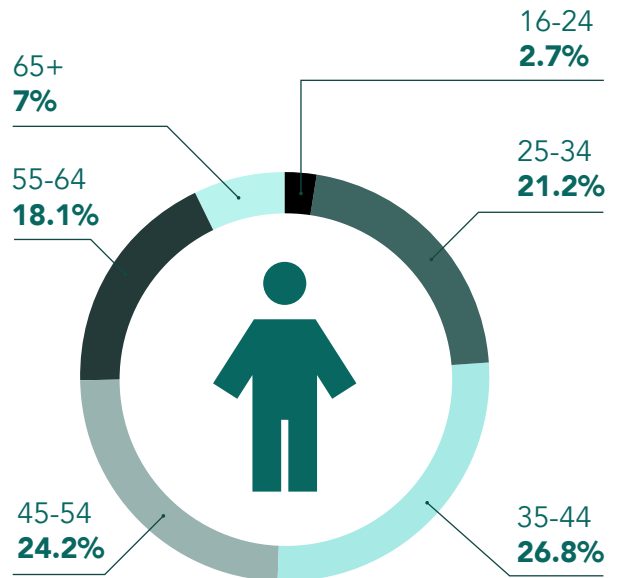
## 1. Participants' location

Survey participants were asked to enter the first part of their postcode, e.g., TS3, to ensure the collection of data from across all areas and to facilitate regional comparisons.



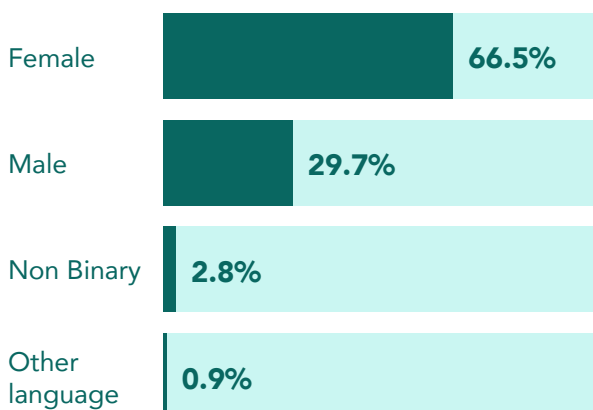
## 2. Participants' age range

Participants were asked their age.



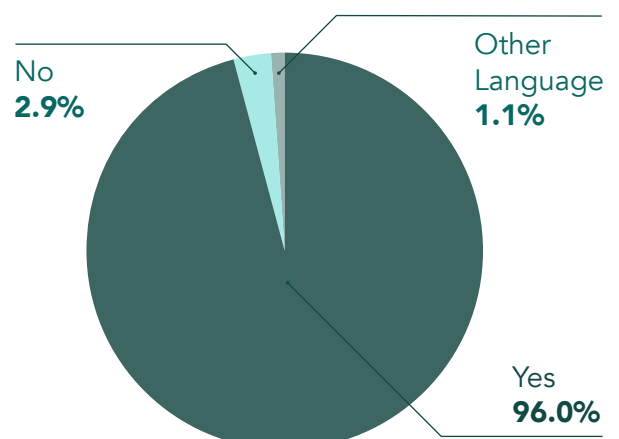
## 3. Participants' gender identification

Participants were asked, 'Which of the following best describes you?'



'Other language' text responses included A-gender, Gender-queer, Queer, Transgender, and They.

Further, survey participants were asked, 'Is the gender you identify with the same as the sex you were registered at birth?'

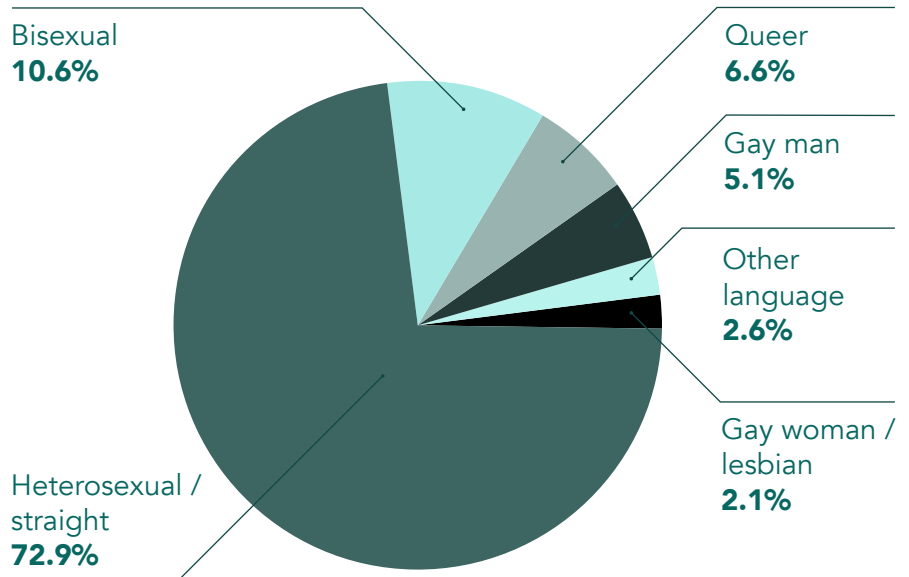


'Other language' responses included Genderfluid, Non-binary, and 30 responses which were critical of the question in some way, for example, stating 'not relevant'.

## 4. Participants' sexual orientation

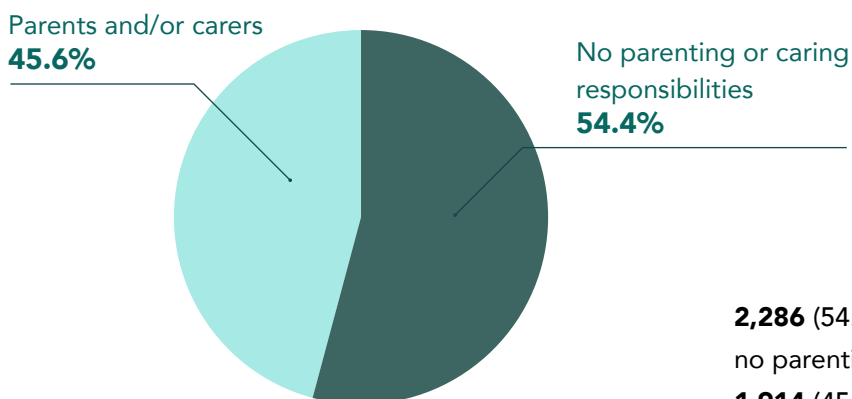
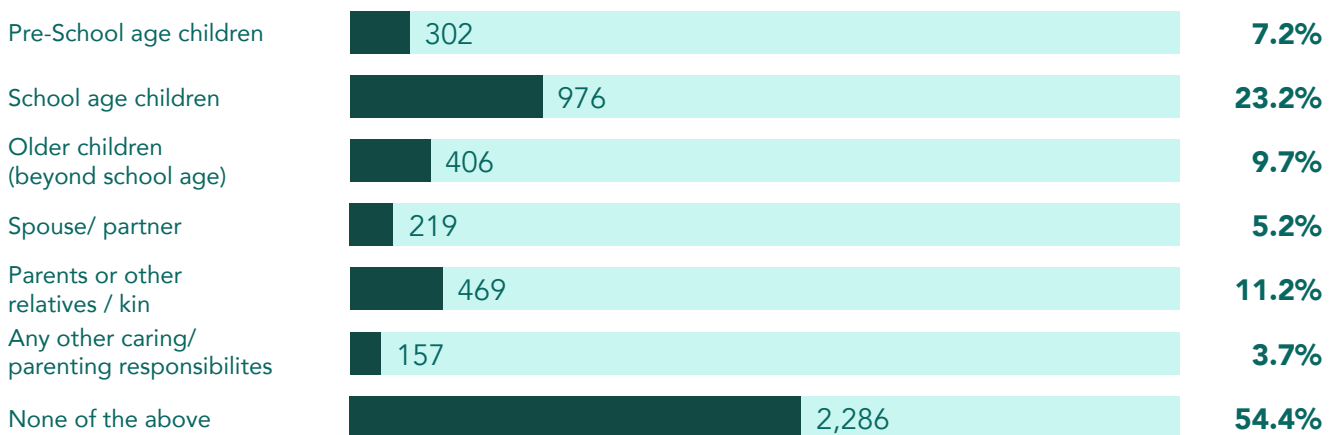
Survey participants were asked, 'Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?'

Other language responses included: Asexual (13), Fluid (2), Pan/pansexual (31).



## 5. Caring and parenting responsibilities

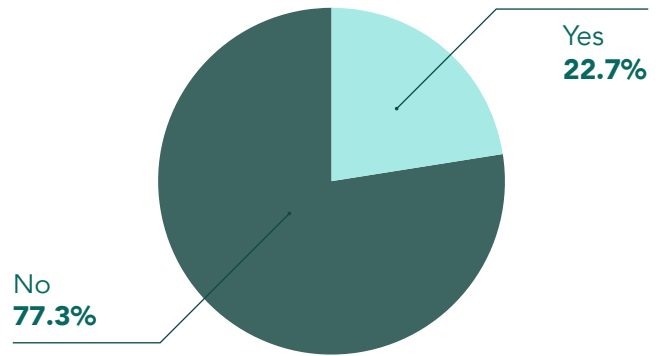
Survey participants were asked, 'Do you have caring or parenting responsibilities for any of the following? Please select all that apply'.



**2,286** (54.4%) of those who responded have no parenting or caring responsibilities and **1,914** (45.6%) are parents and/or carers.

## 6. Participants' self-identification as deaf, or as having a disability or long-term condition

Survey participants were asked, 'Do you identify as a deaf or disabled person or have a long-term health condition?'



## 7. Participants' ethnic group or background

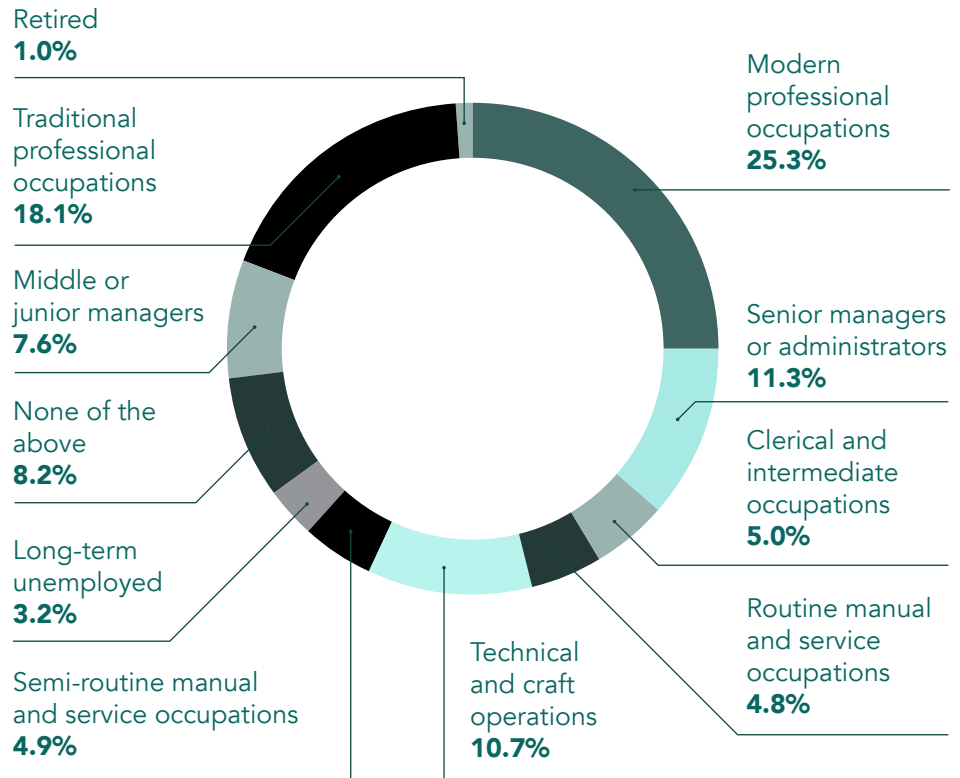
Survey participants were asked, 'Please select one of the following that most closely describes your ethnic group or background'.

**3,602** (87.2%) of participants answering this question identified as 'white', with the remaining 16 groups totalling **527** (12.8%).

White – English/Welsh/Scottish/ Northern Irish/British	2,944	71.3%
White – Gypsy or Irish Traveller	11	0.3%
White – Irish	95	2.3%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups – White mixed	54	1.3%
Any other white ethnic background	498	12.1%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups – White and Asian	66	1.6%
Asian/Asian British – Indian	51	1.2%
Asian/Asian British – Pakistani	15	0.4%
Asian/Asian British – Bangladeshi	4	0.1%
Asian/Asian British – Chinese	31	0.8%
Any other Asian background	36	0.9%
Black/African/Caribbean/ Black British	58	1.4%
Black African	20	0.5%
Black Caribbean	14	0.3%
Any other Black/African/ Caribbean background	7	0.2%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups – White and Black Caribbean	40	1.0%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups – White and Black African	27	0.7%
Any other mixed/multiple ethnic background	65	1.6%
Any other ethnic group – Arab	8	0.2%
Any other ethnic group – Latin American	35	0.8%
Any other ethnic group	50	1.2%

## 8. Socio-economic background

Survey participants were asked, 'Which of the following best describes the occupation of the main income earner in your household when you were 14 years of age?'

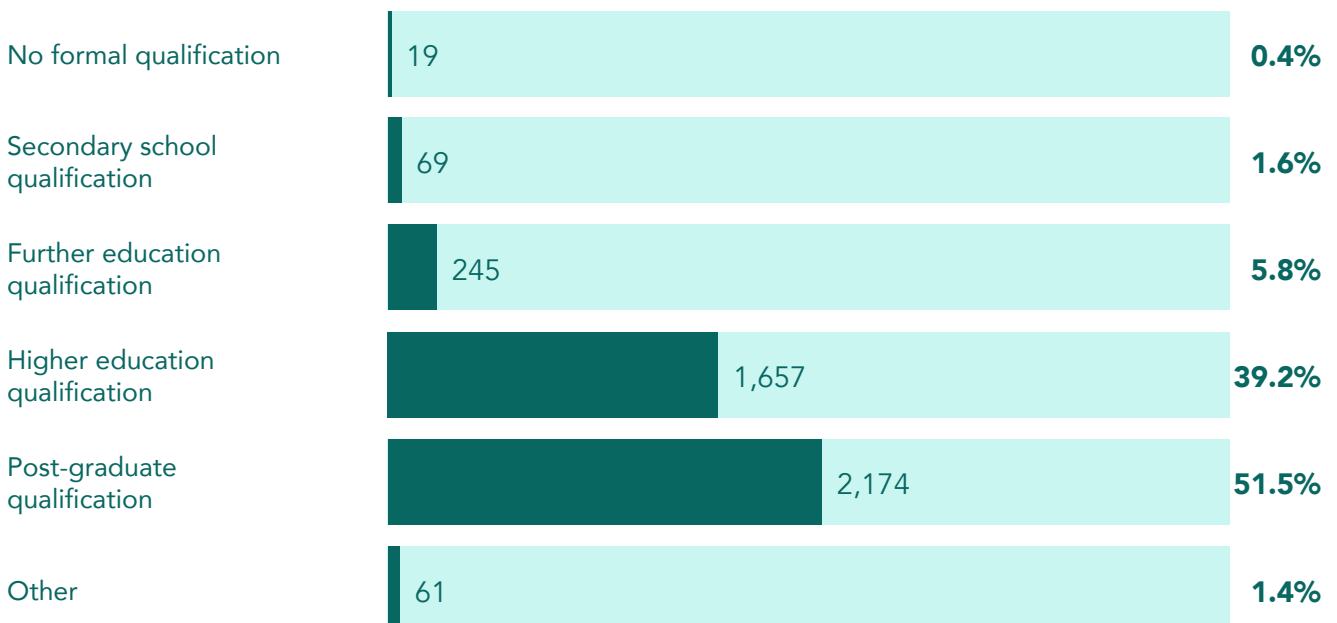


Of those who responded to this question, **39** (0.94%) answered, 'I don't know' (and are excluded above). Text answers following 'None of the above' included Artist, Freelancer, Self-employed, Disabled, and Single parent. 62.3% come from 'higher' socio-economic status backgrounds (parent/s with higher managerial, administrative or professional occupations)

## 9. Educational qualifications

Survey participants were asked, 'What is the highest level of educational qualification you have completed?'

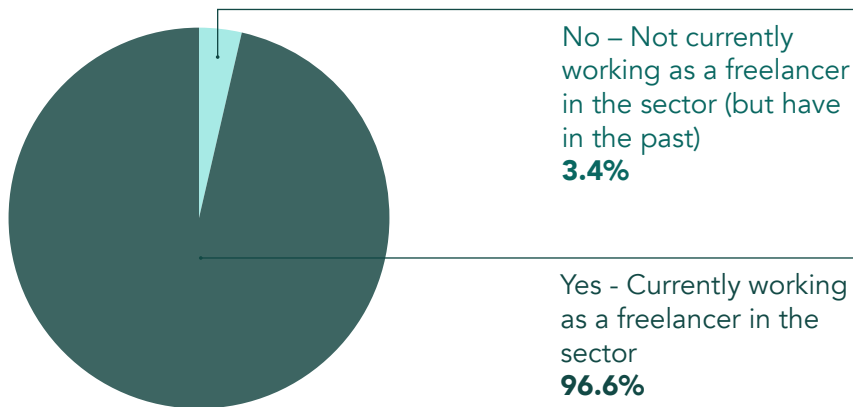
**90.7%** of survey participants have a degree or higher, with **51.5%** having a post-graduate level qualification.





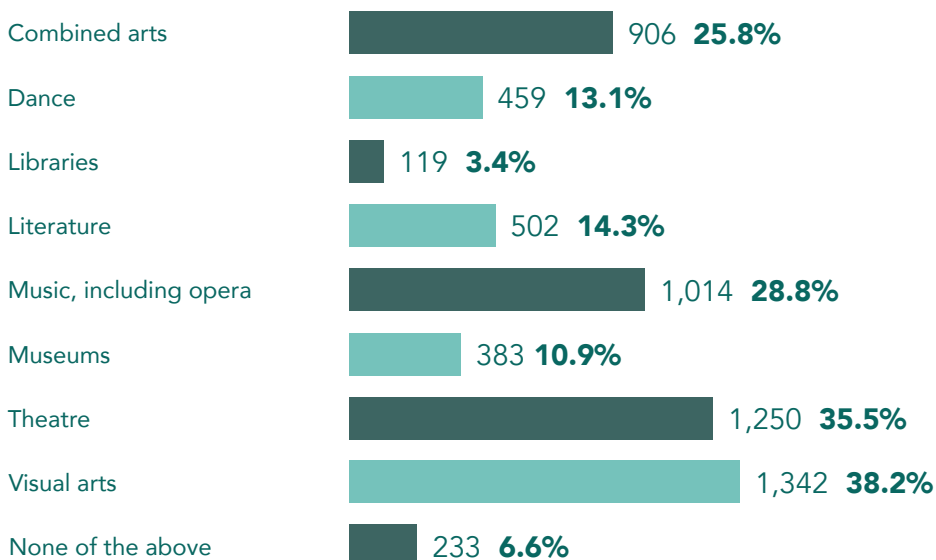
## 10. Current work status and discipline

### Current work status of survey participants



### Disciplines

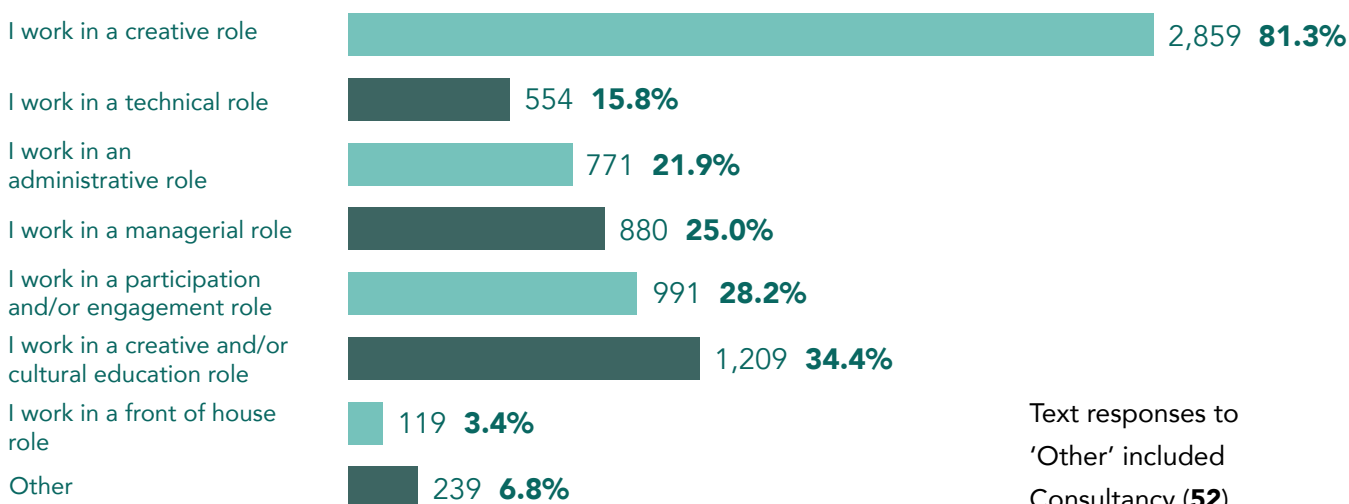
Participants were asked, 'In which of the following disciplines do you mainly work? If you work in multiple disciplines, please select all that apply.'



Those who answered, 'None of the above' included the following descriptions: TV, Film, Community arts, Radio/audio/spoken word, Storytelling, Circus, and Education/academia.

### Roles

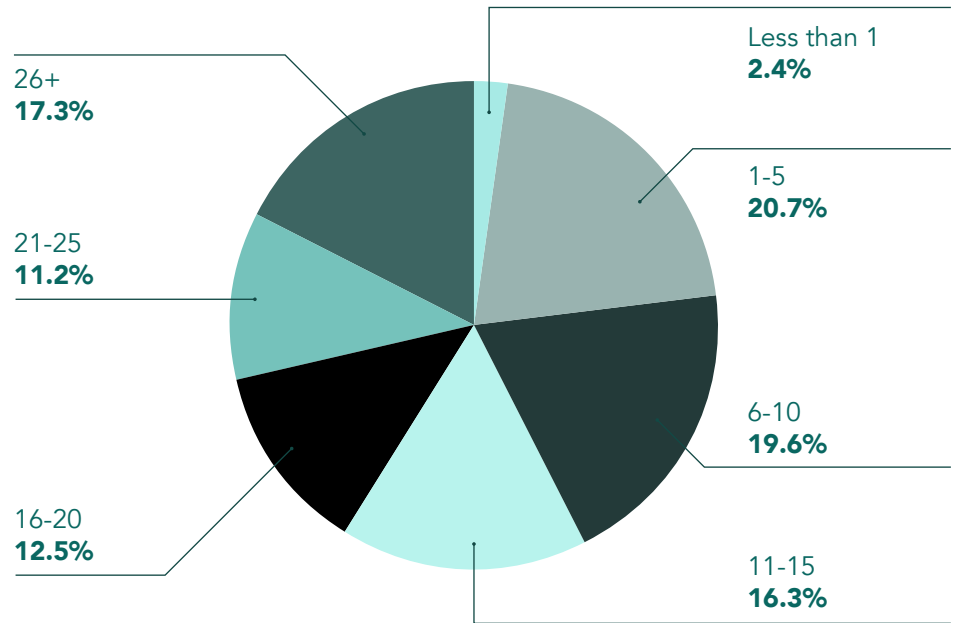
Current freelancers were asked, 'Which of the following best describes your freelance work in the creative and cultural sector? Please select all that apply.'



Text responses to 'Other' included Consultancy (52).

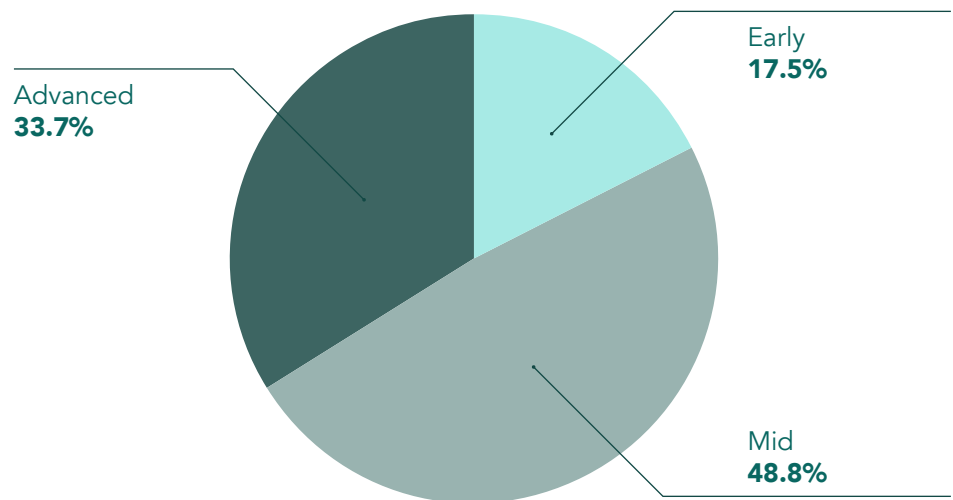
### Experience

Current freelancers were asked, 'How many years have you worked as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector?'



### Career stage

Current freelancers were asked, 'Which of the following most closely describes your own view of your career stage?'



01

# The distinctive nature and experience of freelance work in the sector

# 1. The distinctive nature and experience of freelance work in the sector

Just under one-third (29%) of current freelancers who took part in the survey combine freelance work with PAYE, while 69% work only/mainly as a freelancer<sup>4</sup>. Most report that their main reason for working freelance is that it is the only type of employment available to them, whether due to the nature of their occupation or due to difficulty in finding permanent, PAYE employment in the sector.

Many freelancers value the scope for creative autonomy and freedom that freelance work in the sector provides, but many also highlight substantial challenges, including socioeconomic uncertainty and the difficulties associated with applying for funding.

An 'overwork-underpayment' bind (FMTW, 2023)<sup>5</sup> is a widespread problem, with 18% of current freelancers indicating that they currently work 48 hours a week or more. Further, 39% of freelancers report being asked/required to take on more work than they are paid for, or work that is outside of their agreed contractual terms over the past twelve months, while 43% have been asked/required to take on more work than they can do in the hours they are being paid for.

Of significant concern is that 83% of freelancers report that their working hours impact negatively on their life outside of work 'sometimes' or more (including 'always/almost always' and 'very often'). 'Donated labour' is a widespread problem resulting in many freelancers being trapped in a financial situation in which they are unable to earn enough income from their freelance work, which nevertheless takes up a large number of hours. There are many reasons for this, including what freelancers perceive to be a common practice across the sector, namely under-budgeting.

4 In 2022 13% of the UK workforce was self-employed [UK self employment rate 2022 | Statista](#)

5 Freelancers Make Theatre Work (FMTW) (2023) 'Undervalued, Underpaid, Under Pressure', <https://freelancersmaketheatrework.com/bigfreelancersurvey/2023report/>

## 1.1 Reasons for working freelance

Many freelancers clearly value the opportunities for creative autonomy, artistic freedom, flexibility, and collaborative working that being a freelancer in the sector provides. Many of those who took part in the study referred to the value they attribute to being part of a freelance working community; others highlighted the benefits of a working life that enables them, as one freelancer put it, 'to be able to pivot as and when needed', referring to their capacity to change direction, and re-orientate themselves and their work relatively easily and autonomously.

A significant majority of freelancers said that their main reason for working on a freelance basis is that it is their only option. This is because of the way in which work in the sector is organised and funded, resulting in a high reliance on freelance labour and a relatively limited availability of permanent, PAYE employment opportunities.

Emphasising this, many freelancers said, for example, that 'there isn't any non-freelance work of this nature in the UK', or 'the industry dictates my freelance status'. 'Organisations only employ freelancers to do what I do' was a widely stated view on the nature of the sector and freelancers' work in it.

Overall, freelancers indicated that the most positive aspect of freelance work in the creative and cultural sector is that it allows scope to do something that they are passionate about in a way that affords them a considerable degree of autonomy and flexibility that they might not otherwise have. A widespread view is that one of the most positive aspects of working as a freelancer is the opportunity it provides to work creatively and collaboratively with other freelancers.

## 1.2 The main challenges that freelancers face

Even though many freelancers derive pleasure and satisfaction from working on a freelance basis in the sector, they face multiple challenges, some of which are distinctive to their work in the sector or which are experienced in particularly chronic or otherwise problematic ways by creative and cultural freelancers. As is well documented elsewhere, these include chronic financial precarity, low pay, late payment, insecure and unpredictable income streams and workflows, and large amounts of unpaid overtime. Many freelancers report that they experience the process of applying for and securing funding as an ongoing challenge. Chronic low pay and the need to commit often large amounts of unpaid hours to projects are significant problems associated with freelancing across the sector. Unsustainably high levels of financial precarity in terms of workflow and income are a major concern, particularly in terms of their impact on freelancers' ability to make long-term plans.

Freelancers reported often being hired for a given period and then suddenly finding their contracts being truncated or the agreed rate of pay being reduced with little or no notice or negotiation. This was aptly illustrated by an artist who shared their experience of being abruptly dropped from a project they had been working on for over a year:

*... the manager that had been my contact, had offered me all this work stopped answering my emails... I eventually got an email saying, "Oh, sorry, we changed the budget, can't do it anymore." Again, taking no responsibility, you know, that they had messed up or even saying, "We have messed this up, we have let you down," they were just sort of like, "Oh well, we're just not doing it anymore".*

This scenario results in freelancers reporting high levels of anxiety around job insecurity, shaped by 'the fear of work running out'. This, in turn, creates a situation in which many take on any work that is offered to them in their efforts to manage financially. They then find themselves struggling to cope with the workload, given the timeframe and expectations (themselves often shifting) that are involved. This was described by one freelancer as follows:

*There is no regular income, and I have to go months between payments sometimes. Because there is no guarantee when jobs will come or go, I have to say "yes" to everything that comes along, ... so I go from stagnant to overwhelmed in the blink of an eye.*

Freelancers are very aware that the arts organisations who employ them are themselves under financial pressure. However, many feel that the impact of dwindling budgets is being disproportionately borne by freelancers due to a lack of regulation and standardisation, perpetuating the problem of many freelancers working a large number of unpaid hours.

Many freelancers reported finding it difficult to negotiate for fairer pay, knowing that commissioning organisations are themselves operating on tight budgets. Nonetheless, organisations commissioning work below National Minimum Wage or the London Living Wage, or equivalent, was widely reported as a problem across the sector, placing a disproportionate strain on freelancers, who note the need for better regulation and increased accountability.

Of particular concern are the gaps that emerge between grant application costings and operating budgets caused by under-budgeting, which freelancers understand to be a practice that is commonly used by organisations across the sector in order to be able to make funding applications within grant thresholds. However, it is a practice that leaves freelancers feeling that they are required to absorb or 'make up' this gap in their pay, hours and workload. For example, one freelancer observed how:

*... Arts orgs or projects might have a cap on their budgets and can't pay artists or designers a proper rate in order to keep their bid under £30K, say. If costs change between the time they apply and receive their funding, I have to take the hit as their budgets are fixed and inflexible.*

Moreover, while these are widespread problems across the sector, they are also contoured by the discipline and role people work in, by career stage, and by freelancers' backgrounds and circumstances. For instance, while financial precarity is a widespread problem across all career stages, as has been widely documented elsewhere, freelancers in the early and later stages of their careers seem to experience this in particularly acute ways. Over-booking (and over-working) are common practices that freelancers use to try to offset this at all career stages, but especially so when they describe themselves as early/emerging or at a later stage in their career, when they feel 'the work is drying up due to ageism', as one freelancer working in the dance industry put it.

### 1.3 Freelancers' experiences of securing work and of HR processes

The challenges associated with obtaining and retaining work are a major concern for freelancers across all disciplines. Arts organisations' hiring practices, perceived to be dominated by personal recommendation and nepotism, are regarded by many as discriminatory and as lacking respect and transparency.

Freelancers report being hired for a given period and then suddenly finding their contracts truncated or the agreed rate of pay reduced with little or no notice (as noted above). They are concerned about a widespread need for improved communication around contracts and for clarity regarding pay and expectations from the outset of a project. The latter is reported as being widely lacking across the sector.

Arts organisations were identified as frequently being opaque about terms and conditions, working hours and fees. Freelancers report that organisations often fail to provide any formal contract, named point of contact, or a clear statement of project

parameters, including rates of pay and working hours. Even where these are made relatively clear at the outset, freelancers report that project terms, conditions and expectation often change rapidly and sometimes, repeatedly, with little or no notice to freelancers involved. Many report that this, in turn, leads to a gradual increase in unremunerated workload and, in some instances, the need for freelancers to withdraw from their commitments due to stress, overwork, ill health or burnout.

Despite the relatively high level of flexibility and commitment required of freelancers, many report a dispiriting lack of recognition of their efforts. A widely reported experience is that of being left out of programmes or credits while others employed on a PAYE basis doing similar work, or work of comparable value to a project, are credited. Freelancers don't see their low pay, relatively poor terms and conditions, and the lack of recognition they often experience as separate issues but as part of an inter-related devaluation of their contributions to the projects they work on, a situation that many find demoralising and frustrating.

Further, freelancers report that this scenario often results in them being excluded from decision-making processes that impact their work in significant ways, in relation, for instance, to project planning, workload scheduling and the allocation of roles and/or tasks, as well as more creative/artistic decision-making. As one freelancer, working in the music industry put it,

*We are not invited to meetings or planning sessions, and if we are we are not paid to go along ... This exploits us but it also sends out a message that our time, our contributions don't matter.*

Indeed, there is a widespread feeling amongst freelancers that they are increasingly marginalised, with many feeling that they are employed simply as 'cheap labour'. Freelancers widely report being required to do more and more work for the same or less pay and with minimal input into organisational decision-making and evaluation processes, and with relatively limited recognition of their contributions relative to other categories of workers.

## 1.4 The 'overwork-underpayment' bind

The 'overwork-underpayment' bind in which many freelancers find themselves trapped means that they are unable to generate enough of a reliable, sustainable income to cover their living costs from their freelance work in the creative and cultural sector, and therefore need to take on more (paid) work. However, their freelance work in the



sector frequently takes up too many hours to leave scope for additional paid work to supplement their income without freelancers risking their health through overwork. Hence, many freelancers who took part in the study report being caught up in the kind of ‘overwork-underpayment bind’ that has been reported elsewhere<sup>6</sup>.

This scenario results in freelancers experiencing high levels of anxiety around job insecurity, shaped by ‘the fear of work running out’. This, in turn, creates a situation in which many take on all or any work that is offered to them in order to manage financially. They then find themselves struggling to cope with the workload, given the timeframe and expectations (themselves often shifting) that are involved.

While many freelancers accept and even enjoy the so-called ‘hustle’—the dynamics of finding and negotiating work in the sector—others point to the toll that continually navigating an ‘overwork-underpayment’ or ‘burnout/poverty cycle’ has on their mental and physical health. Moreover, the unpredictability of work availability and variability of earnings compound these issues. This combination of factors has led to a situation whereby many freelancers feel an ever-greater sense of pressure to accept all offers of work.

Long working hours were reported across disciplines and demographic groups, with over 17% of freelancers reporting, on average, working 48 hours or more per week. Freelancers also report an increasing requirement to undertake additional and/or unpaid work beyond their contracted hours. 39% of freelancers said they have been asked/required to take on more work than they are paid for or work that is outside of their agreed contractual terms over the past twelve months, while 43% said they have been asked/required to take on more work than they can feasibly do in the hours they are being paid for.

Overwork clearly has a detrimental impact on freelancers’ life outside of work, with almost half (46%) reporting that their working hours impact negatively on their life outside of work ‘always/almost always’ (14%) or ‘very often’ (32%).

These findings indicate that it is the ‘norm’ for freelancers to experience overwork alongside chronic socioeconomic insecurity and financial precarity, with many working excessive amounts of unpaid hours.

6 Freelancers Make Theatre Work (FMTW) (2023 ‘Undervalued, Underpaid, Under Pressure’, <https://freelancersmaketheatrework.com/bigfreelancersurvey/2023report/>)

Freelancers report not only working long hours but also working hours they have not been paid for. One-third (33%) of freelancers said that 51% of the work they do in the creative and cultural sector is unpaid, 'donated' labour.

02

# Pay, income and financial support

## 2. Pay, income and financial support

### 2.1 Earnings from freelance work in the sector

73% of freelancers who took part in the study report pre-tax earnings of less than £25,000 per annum from their freelance work, despite the fact that 91% report having a Higher Education qualification (52% of whom report having a post-graduate qualification). This provides evidence of the creative and cultural sector being comprised of freelancers who are predominantly graduates (who tend, on average to earn more over the course of their working lives), but who are comparatively very low paid.

It is not surprising, then, that many freelancers said ‘staying financially afloat’ was their biggest challenge. Many freelancers report that their income is insufficient to cover their living expenses and household bills (‘negative income’). The increased cost of living was widely cited as a ‘crisis’ for freelancers, many of whom noted that they were already acutely stretched in the wake of Covid-19, Brexit, and in the context of chronic low pay and income insecurity.

Many freelancers describe hitting an ‘income wall’ mid-career, citing this as a point at which freelancers with valuable skills and experience leave the industry in search of better income security. Others referred to the demoralising effects of working in a sector that, in their view, fails to recognise their accumulated abilities and commitment via career progression and increased pay. A combined arts manager in their 50s, for instance, noted how the creative and cultural sector is losing freelancers with valuable experience because they hit an ‘income wall’:

*[They] think “I’m not earning anything more than I was earning when I was 20, and now I need to support my family or I need a mortgage” ...There’s a real wall that hits where people are having to leave the industry altogether and they feel like a failure because they’re [employers are] still valuing you the same as when you started.*

Low pay, being paid late and adequate travelling costs not being factored into rates of pay are problems for freelancers across the sector. The latter – pay not including, or sometimes not even covering necessary travelling costs, leads to geographical barriers for freelancers who must travel some distance to work or who live in remote areas without feasible access to transport. This is compounded by the perception that the creative and cultural sector tends to be, as one freelancer put it, ‘continuously,

relentlessly London-centric'. This latter issue raises widespread concerns that were summed up by a Manchester-based theatre practitioner who explained:

*I've sort of accepted that I'll have to move to London in the next five years to progress my career ... **But - I can't afford to live in London, ... I keep on weighing it up in my head - could I save and take a financial hit? Do I delay it and potentially uproot my life even more when I do go? Should I just bite the bullet while I'm still young and single and happy in houseshares? I want to get to the top of my art form (original emphasis).***

Further, the perception that low fees are indicative of a lack of recognition of freelancers' contributions to the sector and the economy and society more generally is widespread. Not only does this impact on freelancers' sense of worth and their well-being; it perpetuates their financial precarity. This creates a vicious circle, as freelancers themselves learn to undervalue their skills and contributions to the point whereby many are hesitant to put up their rates due to fear of losing work or feeling anxious about asking for increased fees. As an example of a widespread scenario, a dance facilitator who took part in the study recounted asking friends and colleagues if they had ever tried to negotiate higher fees, finding that:

*... eight out of ten times none of them have tried. They've just picked up somebody else's rate and then just said, 'Well I'm never, ever going to try and put myself higher than this.*

## 2.2 Pay below agreed union or industry rates

Being offered freelance work with rates of pay that are lower than agreed union or industry rates is a widespread problem. 70% of freelancers reported that they have been offered work at below the agreed union/industry rates 'sometimes' or more frequently over the past twelve months. Further, 70% of those who had been offered work at below standard rates reporting that they had accepted them 'some or all' of the time with 14% saying they had done so 'all' of the time. Freelancers report that this is largely because they are not in a position to turn any offers of paid work down, or they don't feel able to push for higher rates of pay.

## 2.3 Pensions, maternity and sick pay

Two further financial issues are important to note. One is the widespread problem of freelancers' inability to make financial provision for their retirement. The other is freelancers' inability to access paid sick leave, both of which are perennial concerns for the vast majority of freelancers.

Over two-thirds (68%) of current freelancers report being unable to contribute to a work-related pension or to make financial provision for their retirement. Moreover, among those aged 65+, almost half (49%) indicated that they have been unable to pay money into a pension or make financial provision for their retirement, and among those aged 50-64, two-thirds (66%) said that this is the case.

As a result, many freelancers expect to have to continue working past the state retirement age. A 54-year-old theatre practitioner and filmmaker summed up widespread concerns when they said, 'I don't know what I'm going to do after I am 65 ... because there's nothing to fall back on'. And for those who do retire, returning to work in order to generate additional income is not uncommon. As one freelance art technician explained it:

*We're an ageing workforce ... A friend of mine, he was 67 the other day and retired, but ... he's coming back ..., but that's the life of freelancer in the sector ..., it's hard to save for your retirement.*

Such concerns are compounded by freelancers' lack of access to organisational infrastructures, particularly with respect to work-related illness or injury. As another freelancer in the visual arts said:

*There is no safety net, and companies have no obligation to pay me even if I became ill in the workplace because they have not created safe working conditions ... having no sick pay is really hard.*

Similarly, freelancers' lack of access to employment-related maternity provision or a guarantee of work on returning from maternity or sickness is a widespread concern.

Many freelancers rely on partners and spouses for both day-to-day financial stability and future security. More than a quarter (28%) of freelancers stated that they would not be able to stay working in the sector, with its chronically low pay, insecure

workflow, and lack of work-related benefits, if they did not have a spouse or partner with a steady income that they could rely on when needed.

03

**Voice,  
representation  
and recourse**



### 3. Voice, representation and recourse

While over 60% of freelancers who took part in the study reported that they are not a member of a union, freelancers who are members of unions generally shared positive experiences of them. For example, a freelancer working in theatre explained:

*It has been useful in terms of rights of pay and in terms of knowing that there is a back-up and that there is someone there ... it feels like a belonging.*

Many freelancers recognize and appreciate the role that unions and other membership organisations are playing in contributing to a growing awareness of the needs of particular groups of freelancers. As one freelancer who self-identified as neurodivergent noted, unions have been important sources of funding and support streams:

*I am part of [a union] and also [a network for disabled artists]... They have a newsletter that is really amazing ... [and] an invisible disability [group] which I'm a part of ... in terms of funding I think there's a whole world of funding available, which is quite exciting.*

Yet some freelancers reported being unaware of the existence of unions serving freelancers in the sector, or they expressed dissatisfaction with their perceived ineffectiveness in influencing policy, standardising fees, securing fair contracts, and in providing advocacy and accountability. For others, the idea of having to pay fees out of an already limited and uncertain income was off-putting, or simply prohibitive. Some freelancers associated being a member of a union with having to exercise a certain level of conformity that they felt was impractical, and others felt that some unions are too specific to particular areas of work or disciplines to be relevant to their broad portfolio of work across the sector.

Despite relatively low levels of union membership, freelancers are concerned about a general lack of representation and voice and feel the need for more influential advocacy on their behalf going forwards. A video editor working in the classical music industry said, 'I don't think there is a collective voice for artists, ... I don't think I feel like I have any voice at all'. Other freelancers explained feeling 'a lack of support ... and lack of community'.

Others noted the value of membership organisations in providing free seminars, legal assistance, and support, especially in navigating contracts, intellectual property rights, and financial issues. Many emphasised, in the absence of organisational infrastructures, the importance of self-organised professional networks and communities, yet many also noted the large amounts of additional 'donated' time and work that these can involve, urging funding bodies to provide better financial support to advocacy organisations.

04

# Development and progression

## 4. Development and progression

### 4.1 Freelancers' lack of access to support and mentoring

Freelancers generally report that they experience a paucity of developmental opportunities, lacking formal access to support and mentoring, and scope to develop their professional skills. The most significant training needs freelancers identified are for the development of legal and contractual knowledge and skills, including pay and contract negotiation. 70% of freelancers said that they do not have access to supervision, advice, mentoring and/or support if/when they feel they need it.

Freelancers acknowledge that lacking access to professional development opportunities may be an issue across the labour market. It is experienced as a widespread problem in the creative and cultural sector because the sector often requires particularly high levels of functional flexibility. In practice, this requires many freelancers to take on a number of roles and responsibilities, often simultaneously and for many, beyond their skill set, experience and agreed terms and conditions.

81% of freelancers reported that they find out about suitable work opportunities through personal recommendations, and 56% through repeat bookings, corroborating concerns about work opportunities being difficult to access for those who are marginalised, or who lack access to established networks.

### 4.2 'Stagnant pay'

Freelancers across the sector are concerned about 'stagnant pay' (rates of pay that do not increase to reflect their years of experience, and accumulated skills and expertise). Aside from the material implications of this, pay stagnation means that freelancers are unable to use increasing earning capacity as a measure against which to mark their career progression. In turn, this has consequences for freelancers' motivation and mental health, and for skills retention in the sector, as noted above. A lack of pay progression also worsens the chronic financial situation that many freelancers find themselves in, as living expenses tend to increase as people get older and take on more responsibilities. Many freelancers report being unable to plan or prepare for their retirement (as noted earlier). Others report delaying making plans to start a family due to their financial circumstances.

The 118 former freelancers who took part in the survey were asked the question, 'What was your main reason for stopping work as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector?', the most widely cited reasons were financial, with many reporting

being unable to sustain a working life as a freelancer due to chronically low and/or stagnant pay in the sector. Some said that they had left in order to build up a pension through PAYE work. For others, it was the emotional and mental strains of ongoing financial uncertainty that had prompted them to leave.

Some former freelancers reported leaving because of issues relating to equality, inclusion, and accessibility. Examples include freelancers' leaving because, in their view, work opportunities had dried up because of ageism across the sector. Others had left for parenting/caring reasons, with some citing the challenges of being a single parent as 'incompatible with the instability of freelance working'. Other former freelancers said they had left because of ongoing challenges associated with working with deafness, a disability and/or a long-term health condition.

05

# Equality, inclusion and accessibility

## 5. Equality, inclusion and accessibility

Just under half (47%) of all current freelancers reported thinking that the creative and cultural sector is 'not very' or 'not at all' inclusive. However, this figure is higher among freelancers who identify as non-binary (68%), or as trans (67%), or Black, Asian and ethnically diverse (66%), or as deaf, disabled, or as having a long-term condition (59%). Freelancers reported a wide range of issues and experiences as contributing to these perceptions, including being subject to discrimination, harassment, and stereotyping. Further research is needed to fully understand these issues, particularly in relation to freelancers with protected characteristics.

Most freelancers emphasized the importance of creating inclusive spaces and of providing adequate support for all freelancers to thrive in their work and creative endeavours. Some reported examples and experiences of what they considered to be 'best practice' that other organisations might adopt, including asking for access riders, regularly checking in with freelancers to understand and recognise their needs, and potentially offering coaching (see Section 9).

### 5.1 Perceptions of diversity and inclusion

Some freelancers appreciate the progress that is being made in reducing barriers and increasing representation across the sector and within organisations. Others indicated a mistrust in the authenticity of organisations' diversity agendas, with a perception that organisations are looking for 'easy fixes' by, for example, offering short-term contracts to a more diverse cast without addressing the need for systemic change. One freelancer summed up a widespread concern that freelancers can be employed to create an impression of diversity and inclusivity, while organisational power relations and hierarchies remain intact:

*The most diverse group of people in an organisation are your freelancers. We usually bring diversity in terms of disability, sexuality, gender, and all of that kind of stuff. But having said that, you look at positions of power in the organisation, and the higher up you go, the less diverse it gets.*

A further concern that is widely shared among freelancers is that some diversity and inclusion initiatives are perceived to be effectively 'forcing' freelancers to divulge aspects of their identities or personal lives that they would prefer to keep to themselves in order to acquire work. Freelancers feel that such practices

unfairly place them in a position of being 'representative' of particular marginalised or protected groups in a way that many experience as tokenistic or essentialist.

## 5.2 A need for more proactive anti-racism approaches

Freelancers reported experiences of discrimination and racism, such as being offered menial work instead of skilled roles or facing stereotyping based on their race or ethnicity. A widespread desire amongst freelancers is to see more proactive and creative approaches to developing diversity across the sector and not simply in response to external pressures or as reactions to cultural events such as the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. As a museum freelancer explained:

*I just wish it didn't take these huge cultural moments for these organisations that have been around for ages to be like, "Oh, let's do something." I wish there were more, not reactive, just took their own initiative to do things rather than reactive to the political climate or whatever was going on around them because they can and they should be leading the way, and I feel like arts organisations need to be leading the way with this stuff.*

## 5.3 The need for better understanding and recognition of freelancers with disabilities

23% of survey respondents self-identified as a deaf or disabled person or as having a long-term health condition. Amongst the challenges they report experiencing, 'stigma or lack of understanding' was the most widely cited (63%). The pace, intensity, and networking demands of freelance work in the sector were also noted as significant challenges.

For participants with mental health conditions in particular, the pace, intensity, and networking demands of freelance work in the sector were noted to be a significant challenge. As one freelancer working in the theatre industry put it:

*With an invisible mental health condition it can be very hard to meet application deadlines, maintain a social media presence and have the self-confidence to build networks and connections. These are all barriers to getting more freelance work.*



Many freelancers who are deaf, or who identify as having a disability or long-term condition noted the need for help with advocating for their needs. For those with long-term conditions, it is often difficult to convey what their condition means in terms of how and when they work, raising issues around a general lack of understanding or willingness to listen and making it hard to communicate their situation effectively. One freelancer reported, for example, experiencing a ‘lot of talking over me and no interest in consulting me for what might actually help’ when trying to negotiate reasonable adjustments to a work environment.

## 5.4 Neurodivergent freelancers’ needs and experiences

Neurodivergent freelancers in particular referred to their struggles to navigate bureaucratic systems and traditional workplace structures. Several highlighted that organisations often overlook the need to set clear expectations around meetings and communication schedules, a situation that can be detrimental to neurodivergent people’s ability to participate fully in creative and organisational decision-making; one participant expressed frustration with meetings that,

*Don’t have an end time and that sounds really daft, there’s a start time and I’ll have no idea how long it’s going to run ... It’s just open-ended and some people are obviously happy for that to drag on and on, but I cannot process ... an open-ended amount of time. So, for me, if there’s a meeting, I really need it to have an end time.*

## 5.5 Challenges related to age

Many freelancers highlighted concerns about the challenges faced by older people in the creative and cultural sector. The focus groups and interviews provided insight into freelancers’ worries about the effects of physical decline and a perceived inability to sustain the required pace and effort associated with much freelance work in the sector.

Previously discussed concerns over pension provision and access to funding are widespread among freelancers, especially given an ageing demographic across the sector and society more widely. And concerns about ageism and the effects of assumptions that all emerging artists should be young are widely cited concerns. In reality, many ‘early career’ freelancers may have worked for a number of years or even decades in other areas but may be at a relatively earlier stage in their freelance careers in the sector. Many freelancers are concerned about the potentially discriminatory

effects of the assumption that 'early career = young', especially in terms of its impact on access to programmes which offer age limits for emerging practitioners.

Age-related issues such as menopause can also impact substantially on women's mental and physical health, highlighting the need for support and understanding from arts organisations and funding bodies. One community arts maker spoke about the difficulty facing women going through the menopause and how there is little support out there for freelancers addressing this particular stage of life compared to those who might have access to collegial and organisational support.

Freelancers are also concerned about what they feel is a lack of support for older, more established artists to learn about new and emerging technologies, such as AI.

## 5.6 A need to address the barriers for working class freelancers

Many freelancers are especially concerned about what they consider to be a paucity of support for those without independent financial means to enter and sustain working in the sector. A widely held view is that only those who are independently wealthy or who have access to extensive support from a partner or wider social network are 'set up to thrive as creative freelancers'.

A related, widespread concern is that financial inequalities combined with other barriers to accessing work for working-class freelancers perpetuate a social and cultural elitism across the sector. Issues of concern to freelancers include a relative lack of access to social networks, the effects of social and cultural stereotypes, and language/accents related barriers. These kinds of issues are viewed and experienced as preventing freelancers without the requisite financial, social, and/or cultural capital from being able to take up available opportunities or to thrive as freelancers in the sector. As an example of this view, a freelancer working in museums explained:

*If you're working class, you don't have the connections, you can't just go and do an internship with no pay. You can't take up any of these short-term opportunities because you just haven't got that financial cushion and those connections and the parental support and capital.*

## 5.7 More support for freelancers with parenting and caring responsibilities

The uncertainties associated with precarious work, low pay and unpaid labour were linked to the challenges involved in securing affordable childcare, and planning for and supporting a family. In addition to practical challenges, freelancers reported concerns about how their parenting and caring responsibilities were perceived in a sector and work context widely known for demanding constant availability and visibility. One freelancer described their main challenge of working in the sector as feeling 'invisible, overlooked, or diminished because I have caring responsibilities'. Several freelancers raised concerns specifically about what they felt was the direct or indirect discrimination they faced because of their parenting and/or caring responsibilities. In some instances, these were due to a felt inability to travel for better-paying jobs, while in others, they were due to a perceived concern that potential employers might consider them to be unreliable or inflexible, an issue raised by a freelancer working in theatre and visual arts:

*It is a genuine worry that opportunities will be taken from me if I raise that they might have to work in a slightly different way in order to accommodate me, so I do the kind of bending over backwards to try and fit me into it because I need the money and I need the work.*

Other freelancers reported that the financial precarity they experienced made planning for or supporting a family very difficult. For example, one freelancer who had worked for 12 years before leaving not only freelancing but the creative and cultural sector altogether explained that for them, as for many others, the precarity is just not sustainable as a long-term situation, especially for those who are, or wish to become, parents:

*The older I got the more I wanted to kind of have more stability, and now I'm a parent, it was just not really something I could maintain.*

On the other hand, several freelancers spoke of finding freelancing more compatible with parenting and/or caring than other forms of work, largely due to the flexibility it can potentially provide. As one freelancer put it:

*There are obviously loads of benefits with young kids as well in terms of the fact there is some flexibility with freelance working, but generally, I don't know, there's a school assembly that gets announced at the last minute, generally if I've not got meetings then I can go to that, I don't have to ask somebody, so there are definite benefits and I don't know how I would juggle having kids with an employer really, other than working part-time.*

Several freelancers cited positive experiences of the support that organisations had provided to them as working parents and/or carers, notably sending schedules as early as possible to allow freelancers to arrange childcare and other responsibilities in advance.

06

# Mental health and wellbeing

## 6. Mental health and wellbeing

Many freelancers report that their work is a valuable counter to mental health challenges, both their own and those experienced by others. As one freelancer put it, 'spending an hour writing or rehearsing can completely save your day if you're otherwise in a difficult head space'. However, mental health and well-being emerged as areas of widespread concern for freelancers across the sector. Challenges that impact on freelancers' mental health include a chronic lack of work-life balance and widely reported levels of fatigue, anxiety, and despondency. Such issues are widely related to the insecurity and unpredictability of work availability and to the tendency to overcommit or overwork across the sector.

In the absence of widespread union membership and access to organisational infrastructures, building social networks, seeking peer support, and discussing challenges openly are seen as valuable strategies for coping with the pressures of freelancing in the creative and cultural sector. Freelancer networks are seen as vital not only for networking purposes, but also for social and professional support.

Freelancers consider such support to be particularly important in helping to deal with rejection and the often-competitive nature of the sector, particularly for those in the performing arts. Many described the importance of having a support network composed of other freelancers working in the sector, as family and friends are sometimes unable to relate to the difficulties that are characteristic of working in the industry and the toll these can take on freelancers' mental health. As one dancer summed it up, referring to the importance of talking to other freelancers about the effects of an industry-wide 'rejection norm':

*I end up just getting into this dark hole of being like ... I'm obviously rubbish, no-one wants me. So, I think the wellbeing is definitely opening up and talking to [other performers] ... if you don't it's just a downward spiral.*

## 6.1 Burnout and overwork

Many freelancers reported experiences of overwork and burnout, with producers especially highlighting the difficulties they experience as a result of having to be continually available. One producer reported struggling with boundaries due to having a lot of people depending on them, saying:

*I can often slip into feeling guilty for taking time off or not responding immediately because, unlike a PAYE role, I feel that I need to go above and beyond at all times to secure future employment and get recommendations.*

Not surprisingly, freelancers also said that finding the time and space to be creative, especially when they are out of work, or struggling with overwork and/or burnout, is particularly challenging.

## 6.2 Precarity and stress

The precarious nature of freelance work is cited as a significant cause of poor mental health across the sector. Financial instability, long working hours, inconsistent work opportunities, and constant pressure to maintain professional relationships contribute to widespread stress and anxiety.

Many freelancers report that they have to prioritise material needs over self-care, highlighting the pressure of meeting financial obligations. Not only for food and accommodation but also for work-related costs such as rehearsal and studio space hire, equipment, and so on.

As such, for the majority of freelancers who took part in the study the introduction of long-term, secure funding is, in their view, the most effective way to improve freelancers' wellbeing. Many feel that a substantial financial investment in the sector combined with a change to the funding models is needed in order to mitigate the worst excesses of financial precarity they face that, in turn, cause high levels of stress, burnout and turnover.

### 6.3 Freelancers' work environments

Poor working conditions across the creative and cultural sector significantly impact on freelancers' mental health, as do experiences of workplace discrimination, bullying, and unequal treatment, all of which freelancers describe as 'emotionally and mentally draining'.

Some freelancers raised concerns about the strains associated with speaking out against injustices, or with seeking help when they experience or witness negative behaviours. This is largely due to their fear of repercussions, or of being labelled as unreliable or 'difficult' in a sector in which 'reputation is everything'. According to a freelance designer,

*If you're pushing against ... things that you're finding problematic, particularly around bullying or antiracism work, you can be absolutely defined as a pain ... there are buildings that won't touch me anymore because I've spoken out.*

A number of freelancers with serious mental health conditions explained how the stresses associated with the precarity and challenges of freelance work frequently exacerbate their condition.

A widespread lack of institutional support has led many freelancers to try to self-manage their own mental health care, with many reporting, however, that access to adequate therapy is often financially prohibitive.



07

# Freelancers as a professional community

## 7. Freelancers as a professional community

While union and professional association membership is historically quite low, many freelancers who took part in this study pointed to the importance of peer support networks and the advantages of developing these further.

Many highlighted that their professional experiences are ultimately shaped by those they collaborate with and the interpersonal relationships they build. This was summed up by an experienced theatre production manager who said:

*It's very simple, do you get on with the people that you work with, do you have a good working relationship with that person? [...] If it's an exciting project, that we're all invested together and we're all on the same page and the same wavelength and it's an absolute joy to be able to be with that creative team.*

A widespread view is that arts organisations should be encouraged and supported to play a more proactive role in cultivating positive working environments and cooperative cultures. Some freelancers feel that advocacy organisations should be better supported to mediate this relationship more effectively, for instance by providing some form of accreditation, recommendation or approval process, or by 'endorsing' organisations that are reported as 'freelancer friendly'. One particular freelance project manager who, as part of their work, employs other freelancers suggested how there could be:

*A thing in the middle which would almost be like a charter or like a kite mark, so you would have a "freelancer friendly", there's been "age-friendly" you could have a "freelance-friendly" organisation that goes through a checklist and then they can put on their website, "We're freelancer-friendly".*

Overall, freelancers highlight the importance of a more supportive infrastructure, with improved responsibility and accountability, in tackling some of the causes and implications of the more challenging aspects of freelance work in the sector.

# The wider context of freelance work in the sector

## 8. The wider context of freelance work in the sector

The combined effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit (and related visa and migration policies, the increased cost of living in the UK, and the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) have brought about significant changes to freelancers' work environments, and these continue to evolve. While these are clearly issues that have wide-ranging effects, they have substantial implications for freelancers in the creative and cultural sector for several reasons outlined below.

### 8.1 Societal and political attitudes to creative work

Many freelancers acknowledged that state funding for culture and the arts has been reduced in real terms since 2010 at least, with some tracing this directly to 'austerity politics'. Freelancers who took part in the study expressed a strong sense that while the sector as a whole has been affected, funding cuts have disproportionately impacted on grassroots arts venues, and on arts education especially.

Many feel that the reduction in funding for creative education and learning opportunities in schools, as well as the retraction of arts-based GCSE options, means there will be fewer people to work in the creative and cultural sector in the future. Many freelancers raised concerns about the closure of creative arts departments in schools, colleges and universities, comparing conditions in England and across the UK to circumstances elsewhere.

Many expressed concerns about the reductionist and marginalising effects of a purely economic evaluation of the value of art, that neglects the value of art and creative work as a social good. As one freelance director put it:

*While there is a tendency to defend the value of the creative industries by articulating how many billions of pounds they contribute to the economy, this marginalises the fact that creative activity is a social good, educational, and therapeutic not only for those who experience what results from it but also for all those who are involved in making it happen.*

## 8.2 Covid-19 and beyond

The ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the creative and cultural freelance workforce has been well-documented and widely discussed. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing challenges that freelancers across the sector faced, and as a result of measures designed to contain the spread of the virus (such as successive periods of lockdown and social distancing), many freelancers' income streams totally dried up. Many reported difficulties with being able to access government funding, or Arts Council England's Emergency Response Funds, but freelancers across the sector who were able to draw on this support, said that these schemes provided a vital financial lifeline.

Some freelancers viewed the pandemic as a 'forced break' or 'reset', allowing them to take stock of their career paths or to reflect on the challenges of what had been increasingly unsustainable work practices prior its outbreak. Others feel that, in retrospect, they welcomed the opportunities that periods of lockdown provided to develop new skills and expertise, especially in online performance and production. The latter enabled some freelancers to embrace the scope for greater reach and flexibility that live streaming or live screening was able to offer. Several said they experimented, many for the first time, with online delivery methods during periods of lockdown.

While there were some positive outcomes from the pandemic, the vast majority of freelancers who took part in the study said that they are continuing to feel the impact of the pandemic. This was particularly evident amongst those who had left the industry altogether or who had stopped freelancing. For most of the latter, it was the financial impact of the pandemic that forced them to seek permanent employment in the sector or to leave it altogether. This was especially the case for those who found themselves ineligible for the state-funded emergency *Self-Employed Income Support Scheme* (SEISS).

Other participants in the study who said they were not currently working as freelancers in the sector but had done so in the past cited the demoralisation the pandemic had generated, especially due to what they considered to be the government's lack of sector-specific support for creative and cultural freelancers during this period, as their reason for moving on. Many described seeing the sector, post-Covid, as drained not just of talent but of experience and enthusiasm.

On a more positive note, a general shift towards holding meetings online and a shift away from pre-pandemic levels of work-related travel has clearly benefited some freelancers, particularly those with a disability or long-term condition, or parenting and/or caring responsibilities. Some freelancers also pointed to a rise in grassroots activism, peer networks, and advocacy groups during the pandemic that has led to

more professional networks opening up for freelancers, with some groups that were set up during the pandemic continuing to thrive with enthusiastic contributors and growing membership numbers.

However, reports of audience figures failing to recover in smaller arts and performance venues, and venues, in turn, becoming increasingly risk averse in the face of this, were all reported as having ongoing impact on freelancers. This is especially the case for the many freelancers who are reliant on grassroots organisations. One theatre producer explained how this has resulted in increased risk, saying:

*Taking work out is now an increasingly risky kind of escapade. It's risky financially, it's risky in terms of the amount of hours that are taken up, and I think it's also risky in terms of headspace.*

Further, the ongoing impact of the pandemic means that freelancers report experiencing what were initially envisaged as short-term restructures or pandemic-related adjustments within organisations, remaining in place. Examples include reductions in staff numbers and increases in the length of working days. Both have a detrimental impact on freelancers, requiring them to effectively take on more work for the same or less (and often late) pay, compounding the chronic problems noted above. They also impact in detrimental ways on freelancers who have protected characteristics such as those who identify as deaf, disabled, or as having a long-term condition, and/or working parents and carers, for whom longer working days might indirectly exclude them from work opportunities they might otherwise be suitable for.

### 8.3 Brexit, migration policy and visas

Another area of major concern for freelancers is the ongoing impact of Brexit, the UK's decision to leave the *European Union* (EU). Changes in UK government policy on awarding visas to non-UK nationals and the increasing complexity of UK nationals acquiring visas and work permits to work across the EU are particularly problematic because of the additional costs and restrictions involved. The '90-day rule', which only allows an artist to work for 90 days out of 180 in EU countries, makes events scheduling especially difficult. Across the whole sector, the increased paperwork and bureaucracy often associated with obtaining permits has made UK freelancers feel that they are far less attractive to EU-based employers and organisations.

Freelancers working in opera and music, in which international travel for performances is common, are finding the current situation particularly difficult. Post-Brexit conditions

have led to a significant drop in income for many freelancers in the opera and music sub-sectors, accentuating chronic financial precarity and income insecurity. This is largely due to not being able to easily perform in Europe or, as in many cases, losing out on short-notice gigs and events due to the time it takes to apply for and receive work permits and visas.

For UK-based design and production companies and the freelancers they employ, Brexit has also had a substantially negative impact. It is becoming increasingly economically unviable for UK companies to provide sets and any other sector-related services for EU-based productions and vice-versa. At the same time, visa restrictions have limited the ability of non-UK artists to work freely in the UK, leading to uncertainties and difficulties in planning performances and engagements.

The number of Higher Education students from EU countries in the arts has also dropped, causing problems for talent development programmes in the visual arts, theatre, and dance, and for the sector's labour force pipeline. Additionally, restrictions to the *Global Talent Visa*, designed to bring leaders or potential leaders in various creative fields into the UK, reportedly causes problems for non-EU artists entering the UK. In combination, these issues mean that Brexit is placing considerable strain on freelancers in the sector, and on the arts organisations that employ them.

## 8.4 The cost-of-living crisis

Since late 2021, the UK has been facing a cost-of-living crisis. Given the financial precarity most freelancers in the sector experience, this crisis has impacted substantially on the UK's creative and cultural freelance workforce. As noted previously, many report experiencing 'negative incomes', especially for those who accrued debts during or since the pandemic, and who are losing work in the wake of Brexit.

Freelancers across the sector are concerned about job availability, income stagnation, and the long-term viability of freelance work for them. A midcareer performer who has cut their costs as much as 'humanly possible' highlighted the impact of funding cuts on work opportunities for freelancers:

*I'm trying to find more work, and they'd say, "Well, there's literally no work out there because we've had our funding slashed and so have all our organisations that we work with. We were going to send you to these auditions, but these auditions don't exist anymore".*

Many freelancers are finding it increasingly difficult to find work in their discipline or area and are finding themselves having to do more for less. Many report that they are currently 'donating' large amounts of unpaid labour to the projects they are being employed on.

Freelancers are acutely aware of the situation that many organisations find themselves in, as one freelance film artist and curator observed:

*I feel like organisations are very good at being sympathetic ..., but they're not very good at being able to act or respond in any meaningful way to the cost-of-living crisis, because they're also in a cost-of-living crisis.*

Due to its widespread nature, the cost-of-living crisis has also impacted on what in the past have often been more secure alternative sources of income for some freelancers, especially those working in the performing arts. Jobs such as school and private tutoring, once an often-reliable source of additional income, have seen a decline as schools and parents have less money for 'extras'. A freelancer working in the libraries sector spoke about the fall in after-school activities, explaining how this has led to more competition in an already competitive sector.

Moreover, as in many sectors, the impact of the cost-of-living crisis is not being felt equally across the sector. Younger freelancers or those new to the sector, along with those from under-represented backgrounds or with parenting and/or caring responsibilities, are particularly affected. Many spoke of being deterred from looking for or taking on any freelance work in the sector for as long as the crisis continues. In turn, this leads to concerns about existing inequalities across the sector being worsened by the immediate and longer-term impact of the crisis, especially when set against the background of chronic financial insecurity.

## 8.5 Artificial Intelligence (AI)

A distinct but significant concern for a large number of freelancers is the potential impact of *Artificial Intelligence* (AI) on the sector. Freelancers working in creative fields such as graphic design, writing, music, and photography are particularly concerned.

Some freelancers are excited about the capabilities AI offers, for instance, for enhancing their work efficiency and creative possibilities, enabling mock-ups to be generated quickly and flexibly, or allowing for initial presentations to be improved.



From this perspective, AI is viewed as a potentially valuable tool that might streamline some creative processes.

However, other freelancers are concerned about potential job displacement or loss of creative control and/or artistic integrity. This concern was articulated by an experimental filmmaker and freelance copywriter who observed how his copywriting work had significantly dried up, largely he felt, due to his clients using chatbots such as Chat GPT instead. Similarly, a composer described how creating sound design and other content for music libraries will be at risk, summing up more widespread concerns among freelancers about the speed at which AI is beginning to impact on the sector. Concerns about the need for legislation to protect rights, for advice and training, and for improved advocacy and support are widespread among the freelance workforce across the sector.

09

# Future plans: 'Freelance not free'

## 9. Future plans: 'Freelance not free'

Despite the challenges and concerns discussed in earlier sections, the study points to a generally positive picture of freelancers' intentions to remain in the sector in the foreseeable future.

77% of those who took part said they are 'very' or 'quite' likely to still be working as a freelancer in the sector in three years' time, with only 10% saying that they are 'quite' or 'very' unlikely to be doing so.

Perhaps most revealing is that when asked, 'How likely would you be to recommend working as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector?' 43% of current freelancers said that they would be 'quite' (25%) or 'very' (18%) unlikely to do so.

Freelancers' overall expectation that they will continue to work in the sector on a freelance basis, combined with the general feeling that they would not recommend doing so to others presents a complex picture of current circumstances and future aspirations. However, this combination of findings should not be taken as a sign of resignation, on the part of freelancers, to the circumstances in which many find themselves. On the contrary, freelancers across the sector have clear ideas about what they, and the sector, need in order to secure a fairer future for all. Not surprisingly, freelancers view improved rates of pay and working conditions as central to this. The study highlighted three key priorities: fairness, accountability, and education.

### Fairness

By far the majority of freelancers who took part in the study see securing increased funding for the sector as vital to its future. A widespread view is that securing fair pay for freelancers and working conditions aligned with those of PAYE employees can only be achieved via a substantial and sustainable financial investment in the sector's future. Freelancers' view is that increased funding must be combined with enhanced regulation of the freelance labour market and employment model. Freelancers place considerable emphasis on the need for funding and regulatory bodies to set and enforce standard pay rates and workload limits for freelancers e.g., as funding prerequisites.

Freelancers urge funding and advocacy bodies to consider the need for heightened accountability from organisations to improve freelancers' terms and conditions across the sector, underscoring for example, the necessity for tangible penalties

for those failing to remunerate freelancers fairly and/or promptly. Many freelancers echo the call for a 'freelance basic income' or at least a 'living wage for freelancers' within the sector. Suggestions include advocating for arts organisations to commit to fair pay charters or fee scales, with models like the government-endorsed *Kunstenaarshonorarium* in the Netherlands cited as possibly workable examples. References to successful freelancers' state bursaries, such as the *Intermittents du Spectacle* in France and the *Basic Income for the Arts* trialled in Ireland, were also made.

Fostering inclusivity and implementing enduring policies to embed diversity, inclusion, and sustainability into the creative and cultural sector's fabric is also a widely cited priority. Freelancers urge funding bodies and arts organisations to provide greater support for hybrid working arrangements (combining working online and face-to-face) where feasible, alongside attaching conditions to state funding to promote diversity and inclusion.

Additionally, freelancers urge funding bodies and arts organisations to fully recognise the challenges associated with childcare and caring responsibilities for freelancers in the sector (for instance, in terms of work scheduling), with a call for the sector to acknowledge the needs of caregivers and parents while offering support throughout the maternity/parental care-giving process. While the difficulties associated with accessing affordable childcare are of course not specific to freelancers, or to workers in the creative and cultural sector, problems associated with chronically low pay, work insecurity, scheduling and what in some sub-sectors (especially music and theatre) can be extended periods away from home, make parenting/caring particularly challenging for them.

Despite these challenges, many freelancers are hopeful that increased financial support to institutions and better regulation/enforcement from government, and funding and professional bodies, could result in fairer, more feasible, working arrangements. Many freelancers note that state intervention may be necessary to enforce minimum standards and to ensure that organisations provide adequate financial and wellbeing support, akin to other industries.

Advocacy for reducing working hours is also a priority, with freelancers feeling frustrated and let down that long working hours leading to exhaustion and burnout are the 'norm' across the sector. Evidence suggests that this problem is particularly acute in industries like theatre and music, but it is widespread across the whole sector.

## Accountability

Tasked with the distribution of funding across England's creative and cultural sector, Arts Council England is seen as playing a pivotal role in shaping freelancers' current circumstances and potential futures. Freelancers' view is that Arts Council England has the potential to play a leading role in more effective resource allocation, and in securing a more sustainable, equitable and accessible future for the sector, recognising that legislative change might be necessary to bring this about.

Across the sector, freelancers feel that valuing and properly remunerating freelance work is essential to a just, inclusive, and sustainable future for the sector, and in order to address the day-to-day challenges that they face. One freelancer emphasised this point succinctly, when they said that the future of the sector needs to be based on a principle of 'freelance not free', going on to say that 'too many presume my services come gratis. It's disheartening ... and undermines my self-worth. *This must evolve*' (original emphasis).

Many freelancers would like to see the establishment of a dedicated freelancers' commission, or at least an advocacy body that could work in collaboration with Arts Council England. Such a body could offer representation and guidance on crucial matters, including contractual advice and pay. At the very least, freelancers would like to see stronger mechanisms compelling arts organisations to engage with existing professional bodies and unions, helping freelancers to secure equitable pay and improved working conditions, including contractual terms and job stability.

Most of all, freelancers advocate the need for a thorough review of the funding models in operation across the sector. The dominant view among freelancers is that the current Arts Council England funding model can lead to organisations underpaying freelancers, and to overly rely on unpaid labour. The suggested approach involves Arts Council England discouraging underfunded yet ambitious projects and establishing and enforcing clear terms and conditions. Additionally, freelancers strongly feel that centrally funded organisations should be subject to a complaints and resolution service, allowing freelancers to address concerns regarding funded organisations and projects more formally than freelancers feel is currently the case<sup>7</sup>. Many feel that, when things go wrong, they have no voice and no recourse, and nowhere to turn to, even when working for organisations or on projects funded by Arts Council England.

<sup>7</sup> Arts Council England's 'Raising a Concern' process allows for this, but freelancers' views in the study indicate that awareness of this is not widespread.

A related issue that freelancers feel strongly about is the need for a thorough streamlining of application procedures to ease the administrative burden on freelancers and to better utilise their time doing paid work. There was also a call for directing more funding towards individual practitioners rather than large NPOs, alongside an emphasis on developing early/emerging career schemes that prioritise career stage and longevity over chronological age. And freelancers feel that, if possible, more detailed feedback should be given on unsuccessful applications, with more developmental and mentoring opportunities being offered on future funding applications to increase chances of success.

## Education

Freelancers strongly advocate for increased investment in arts education and creative opportunities within state schools, highlighting the crucial need for comprehensive accessibility. There is a widespread recognition of the need to expose students of all ages to a diverse range of artistic forms and genres. Crucial to a sustainable and accessible future for the sector, freelancers argue, is for the arts to reclaim a prominent and valued position in education. Aside from the pedagogic benefits of this, freelancers feel that the future of the sector needs the audiences and workers that only an inclusion of arts in state education can generate. Freelancers highlight the urgent need, therefore, for advocacy on behalf of arts education, and funding to financial investment to support it, to ensure that all students can engage in artistic endeavours, irrespective of their financial circumstances or backgrounds. Freelancers see this as crucial to sustaining not only of an informed and appreciative audience for the arts now and in the future, but equally for the next generation of freelancers and other creative and cultural practitioners.

# Conclusions

# Conclusions

This study provides a reference point and resource to support the work of those who advocate on freelancers' behalf. It set out to provide insight into the current circumstances of freelancers working across the creative and cultural sector; to provide a publicly accessible data set for researchers and organisations to engage with in order to inform evidence-based decision making and actions, and to establish a baseline to which future research will return.

It has highlighted several significant challenges and concerns that the sector's freelance workforce currently faces, spanning the full breadth of Arts Council England-funded disciplines and areas. These challenges pre-dated both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis in the UK but were exacerbated by these events and their combined impact.

The overarching theme dominating the findings is the precarious nature of freelance work in the creative and cultural sector and the challenges and vulnerabilities this brings with it. The opportunities for flexibility, creative autonomy, and collaboration that freelance work provides are fully acknowledged. However, most freelancers also find that the way the creative and cultural sector is currently structured means there is a significant reliance on freelancers that is not rewarded through fair remuneration, equitable terms and conditions, or recognition of the value of their work. The clear finding that creative and cultural practitioners are often not working freelance by choice exacerbates the disparity between freelancers and those who are employed, as the benefits of working freelance in other sectors are generally not felt in the creative and cultural sector. The sector is perceived to be reliant on copious amounts of goodwill, dedication, and commitment from freelancers.

**In addition, the study highlights several challenges that, while not necessarily unique to freelancers or to those working in the creative and cultural sector, are experienced in distinct ways by creative and cultural freelancers.** Some of these are challenges that might be the exception for other groups of workers, but which are widely experienced by freelancers in the sector, such as an 'overwork-underpayment' bind, and a pervasive 'rejection norm' shaping efforts to secure work, both impacting on freelancers' precarity, mental health difficulties, and inequalities across the sector.

Other challenges are problems for freelancers in other sectors of the economy and labour market (e.g., late payments, having no/limited retirement provision), or for all/many workers in the sector (e.g., relatively low pay). However, the chronic and pervasive nature of the challenges faced by freelancers in the creative and cultural sector means that these difficulties are experienced particularly intensely. These issues include



the large amount of unpaid labour that freelancers in the sector undertake, often but not always, because of under-budgeting; persistent structural, inter-sectional inequalities; freelancers' lack of voice, representation and recourse, and freelancers' need for a more developmental infrastructure, with improved accountability and equity within the funding models underpinning the sector. In combination, these issues mean that freelancers in the sector were and continue to be particularly impacted by crises such as Covid-19, Brexit, and the rising cost-of-living.

In working towards a more equitable, sustainable, and accessible creative and cultural sector for all, and to better support the freelance workforce as central to the sector's future, the study has highlighted the following eight key areas for consideration:

## **Freelancers' pay**

Freelancers have asserted the need for measures to address chronic low pay and unpaid labour, such as establishing fair wage standards and providing support for freelancers to negotiate better terms and conditions. Evidence points to the urgent need for sector-wide guidelines and regulations to ensure fair pay, including transparent costing processes and adherence to minimum wage standards, and other fair pay terms and conditions (for example, pay equity, and comparable terms with PAYE employees).

Late payments, unpaid expenses, and the high cost of public transport contribute to financial burdens for freelancers. To support freelance workers, organisations should be encouraged and financially empowered to allocate sufficient budgets for freelancers' fees and expenses, preventing the practice of underbudgeting and the expectation of unpaid work. Subsidised/minimal travel should also be considered, where possible (e.g., organisations should be encouraged to time meetings, and rehearsals etc. to enable those attending to travel outside of peak times).

## Security

Financial precarity affects freelancers differently depending on factors such as discipline, career stage, and personal circumstances, with older freelancers finding it increasingly challenging. Generating enough income to cover living costs is a significant problem for freelancers, leading to stress, exhaustion, and difficulties in securing housing, especially within feasible proximity to where work opportunities in the sector are located. This is especially problematic given the London-centrism of the sector, which is a major concern for freelancers. Many report 'negative incomes' (not earning enough from their freelance work to cover their living costs and work-related expenses, including travel costs). Contrary to enduring myths about 'suffering for one's arts', financial precarity can stifle creativity and limit freelancers' capacity to produce their best work, individually and in collaboration with others.

Evidence points to the need for changes to government policy and where necessary, legislation to enhance financial security for freelancers, including via access to sick pay, benefits, maternity pay, and developmental funding opportunities. To address the prevalent reliance on freelancing due to limited alternative options, the sector would need to explore ways to increase non-freelance employment opportunities across all disciplinary areas.

## Long-term planning

Freelancers often face challenges in making long-term plans due to the insecurity of their work patterns. Freelancers lack a 'safety net', particularly concerning work-related illness or injury, leading to concerns about financial stability and wellbeing. In planning for families or future life, freelancers find it difficult to navigate the uncertainty of their finances and lack of work-related benefits, impacting in substantial and often inequitable ways on their ability to make long-term decisions and plan for their own, and their families' futures. An example of how these issues impact on freelancers in the sector is planning to have children. A theatre maker and performer in her 30s highlighted this and spoke of the difficulties that women especially face when thinking about starting a family:

*[It's] very challenging planning for kids, particularly because there's no maternity leave, no protection, and no guarantee that I can go back to the industry easily after this break.*

The majority (68%) of freelancers in the creative and cultural sector have been unable to contribute to a work-related pension or make financial provision for their retirement (beyond the state pension). Given their chronically low pay and work instability, many freelancers are concerned about financial vulnerability in retirement, often relying on partners or past employment pensions for support. This dependency leaves them uncertain about their future financial stability and highlights the need for tailored retirement solutions. It also highlights the need to tackle ageism across the sector, as many freelancers expect to be needing to find work well beyond state retirement age.

Tailored pension schemes specifically designed for freelancers in the creative and cultural sector, addressing their unique income patterns and financial challenges, could help to address the high percentage of freelancers in the sector moving towards retirement without work-related pensions. A review of possibilities would be welcomed by freelancers across the sector.

## Respect and recognition

There is an urgent need to foster a culture of respect and accountability across the sector, where freelancers' contributions are valued and organisations uphold their contractual obligations, including in respect of timely payment and fair treatment. This could be achieved through improved communication practices within organisations, including providing clear contracts, discussing payment expectations upfront, and maintaining consistent dialogue with freelancers. Organisations could be encouraged to better advocate for freelancers' interests, invite feedback from freelancers, and demonstrate shared values to build trust and strengthen relationships with freelancers. Involving freelancers in decision-making processes and recognising and compensating them fairly for their contributions could be key to this. Organisations that lead the way in these areas, initiating and implementing instances of best practice that support and value freelancers' contributions, could be better recognised.

Freelancers urge Arts Council England to take a leading role in a sector-wide development of a 'Freelancers' Charter' and, ideally, to gain and monitor organisations' support for this across the sector. Freelancers suggest that, with Arts Council England's leadership, organisations could commit to a workable charter that requires a meaningful commitment to the fair treatment of freelance workers. As an alternative to, or perhaps alongside a charter, freelancers also advocate for organisations and funded projects across the sector to be held accountable by Arts Council England and other funding and advocacy bodies to a more formal and robust code of conduct for all funded organisations, projects, and individuals.

## Recourse and rights

Freelancers benefit from clear and accessible channels for support that empower them to seek advice and guidance in negotiating contracts, resolving disputes, and addressing workplace issues, including experiences of behaviours such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. To ensure workable and effective standards are introduced and adhered to, further measures could be implemented to address fears of reprisals and reputational concerns among freelancers. This would foster a culture of accountability and support across the sector to encourage reporting and to address systemic issues constructively and effectively.

Protection and advocacy efforts for freelancers could be strengthened, ensuring they have access to recourse mechanisms, legal assistance, and representation to address workplace concerns and safeguard their rights. The visibility and accessibility of existing unions could be improved as could an understanding of their potential benefits, addressing misconceptions and barriers to membership through targeted outreach initiatives. Additionally, freelancers feel that unions could adapt their services to better meet the diverse needs of freelancers across different creative disciplines, ensuring affordability, relevance, and effectiveness in addressing freelancers' advocacy and representational needs.

Evidence points to the many benefits of coordinated advocacy across the sector, with unions, arts organisations, and freelancers collaborating to provide support for workable industry standards, fair treatment, and improved working conditions that empower freelancers to collectively address their challenges and concerns.

## Professional development, training, and community

Freelancers value organisations that offer supportive practices such as training opportunities, fair and timely payment, dialogue and care, networking events, and advocacy for underrepresented freelancers. Collaborations with smaller-scale organisations are often perceived more positively by freelancers, as these organisations often demonstrate a better understanding of freelancers' needs and provide more recognition-based support.

Freelancers hope for organisations to be encouraged and incentivised to provide supportive practices for freelancers. Such practices might include offering professional and creative development opportunities, and/or residencies, and involving freelancers in dialogue and decision-making (with fair compensation for their time and contributions). Such measures could enhance working relationships between organisations and freelancers and fully recognise freelancers' contributions. This

would enable arts organisations and freelancers, and the sector as a whole, to benefit from more inclusive, dialogical networks that cater to freelancers' diverse needs and experiences, fostering collaboration, mentoring and solidarity within the freelance community and across the sector. This would likely enable the sector to benefit more effectively from freelancers' skills, abilities, and commitment in a more equitable and sustainable way, tackling some of the skills gaps that are currently a problem in some parts of the sector. Paying freelancers for the time involved in attending valuable training and development opportunities, as well as providing financial support for freelancers to be mentored, and factoring this in to funding models, would be a valuable step forward in this respect.

Partnerships and collaborations between freelancers and smaller-scale organisations and grassroots networks could be encouraged and better financially supported, as these are often well attuned to freelancers' needs and provide effective support. Better provision of resources and funding could be provided to regional and national freelance-support organisations to expand their reach, enhance advocacy efforts, and offer valuable services such as legal advice, funding opportunities, and support for networking events for freelancers.

Many freelancers express a desire for more support, training, or advice across various aspects of their work, including management and organisational skills, marketing/promotion, technical skills, business skills, and legal/contractual knowledge. Training provision for freelancers could also provide better coverage of intellectual property rights, financial/accounting practices such as tax and cash flow management and pitching and presenting skills. However, freelancers also express frustration with the sector's emphasis on individual freelancers to seek training, rather than organisations providing better, and funded opportunities.

Freelancers face challenges associated with accessing training due to costs, competition for limited opportunities, and the need to sacrifice income to participate. The evidence points to a need to ensure that training opportunities are relevant, accessible, and equitable for freelancers, addressing their specific needs and providing scope for professional and creative development, including knowledge and skills-sharing. Mid-career freelancers who hit a developmental 'wall' are an invaluable resource for the future of the industry, with many possessing unique skill sets that, with a workable funding infrastructure in place, could be used to benefit freelancers now and in the future, tackling skills shortages and inequities across the sector. Targeted support for freelancers at all career stages, including mentorship and career development opportunities, would therefore be beneficial to the sector as a whole.

Initiatives to better support freelancer career progression could include establishing clear career development frameworks, implementing effective mechanisms for

freelancers to receive feedback on their work and progress, and ensuring that career development programmes cater to freelancers from diverse backgrounds. This might enable freelancers, organisations, and the sector to address systemic barriers that disproportionately impact on marginalised groups, including (but not limited to) those most affected by accessibility issues.

## Equality, diversity, access and inclusion

While some freelancers perceive the sector to be inclusive or at least becoming more so, others express concerns about chronic, persistent inequality and injustice, citing experiences of stigmatisation, discrimination, harassment, and stereotyping.

Freelancers with protected characteristics especially perceive multiple barriers to diversity and inclusion, including tokenism, and a lack of genuine systemic change within organisations. Many freelancers are concerned about, at one extreme, the exploitation of their 'creative capital', and at the other, the perceived need to 'over-compensate' for, or conceal, additional workplace needs. The research suggests future initiatives aiming to address issues within areas of diversity and inclusion need to:

*Ensure representation at all levels:* Increased representation of marginalised groups at all levels of the sector, including in leadership positions, decision-making bodies, and programming committees is needed. Relevant actions need to support, including financially, the development of an inclusive culture in which diverse voices feel genuinely valued and empowered.

*Combat discrimination and harassment:* Robust policies and procedures to address discrimination, harassment, and victimisation in the workplace need to be implemented. Support mechanisms for freelancers who experience negative behaviours, including confidential reporting channels and access to relevant advice and support services are urgently required, as many freelancers feel they have no recourse when they experience, or witness, negative behaviours.

*Promote diversity:* Proactive measures to promote diversity across the sector, including targeted recruitment initiatives, and the establishment of diversity committees to oversee organisational practices need to be taken.

*Promote inclusion:* Systemic changes to address underlying barriers to equality and access that hinder opportunities for working-class and disabled freelancers especially ought to be implemented. Effective financial support, mentorship programmes, and community-building efforts in deprived areas to foster creative talent are all examples of good practice that could be adopted more widely.

*Promote accessibility:* Funding opportunities and support programmes need to be made more accessible by reducing the amount of time that funding applications take to complete. Providing tailored support and guidance to help navigate funding application processes and career development pathways should be a priority, including by raising awareness of existing measures and support mechanisms (e.g., guidance on funding application processes).

*Create safe spaces for disclosure of access needs:* Spaces for freelancers to feel comfortable disclosing aspects of their identity or background should they wish to do so without fear of discrimination should be created. Organisations should be encouraged to engage in open dialogue about working practices and expectations that make room for the implementation of different access needs. Ideally, funded organisations should be monitored on the implementation and impact of such practices.

## Wellbeing and support

The precarious nature of freelance work in the creative and cultural sector can lead to significant mental health challenges, including burnout, fatigue, anxiety, and despondency. Financial precarity exacerbates mental health issues, and financial instability amplifies stress levels among freelancers, especially those with concerns about 'negative income', while the lack of benefits like sick pay or pensions adds to their burden.

Many freelancers find it challenging to balance their (over)work commitments and personal lives, often experiencing difficulties in switching off from work and setting boundaries. Poor working conditions, including discrimination and unequal treatment, further impact on freelancers' mental health and wellbeing. This can be especially difficult for freelancers who are parents and/or carers, and/or who are from marginalised groups or backgrounds.

Initiatives should ideally include measures to combat isolation, such as fostering collaboration and networking opportunities to facilitate knowledge-sharing and skill exchange among freelancers. Other initiatives, such as subsidised access to co-working spaces, could further benefit freelancers, as well as facilitating freelancer collaboration with key stakeholders to design and implement solutions that promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for freelancers across the sector.

Ultimately, however, improving working conditions for freelancers, ensuring fair pay, access to support and benefits, and an improved work-life balance would best support their mental health. Increased financial stability for freelancers would help alleviate

financial stress and support better mental health via the provision of long-term funding opportunities, benefits, and more reliable financial support.

## **In conclusion ...**

With this report we hope to have contributed to ongoing discussions about freelancers' roles in the creative and cultural sector, providing evidence-based insights into freelancers' experiences, perspectives, needs and recommendations.

We thank all those who have contributed to this research through the survey, focus groups, and interviews for sharing their views so candidly and generously.

**Professor Holly Maples, Professor Philip Hancock, Professor Rosemary Klich,  
Professor Melissa Tyler and Dr Clio Unger, University of Essex,**

**On behalf of Arts Council England**



# Appendices

# Appendix One

## List of all questions asked in the survey

### Block A

**1A.** Please enter the first part of your postcode in the box below, e.g., TS3. This will help ensure that we collect data from across all regions and can make some relevant comparisons. However, please feel free to leave this blank if you prefer to.

### Block B

**1B.** Please enter your current age in the box below. This will help us to understand the needs of people across different stages of the working life course and to make some age-based comparisons. However, please feel free to leave this blank if you prefer to.

**2B.** Which of the following best describes you?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- I prefer to use other language
- I prefer not to say

**3B.** Is the gender you identify with the same as the sex you were registered at birth?

- Yes
- No
- I prefer to use other language
- I prefer not to say

**4B.** Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?

- Bisexual
- Gay Man
- Gay woman/lesbian

- Heterosexual/straight
- Queer
- I prefer to use other language
- I prefer not to say

**5B.** Do you have caring or parenting responsibilities for any of the following? Please select all that apply.

- Pre-school age children
- School-aged children
- Older children (beyond school age)
- Spouse/partner
- Parents or other relatives/kin
- Any other caring and/or parenting responsibilities
- None of the above
- I prefer not to say

**6B.** Do you identify as a deaf or disabled person or have a long-term health condition?

- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to say

**7B.** Do you, or have you in the past, experienced any challenges with any of the following as a result of your disability and/or condition? Please focus on your experiences within the creative and cultural sector. Please select all that apply.

- Access to buildings (e.g., an absence of wheelchair ramps)
- Communication and accessing information (e.g., documents not being in accessible formats)
- Travel or transport (e.g., lack of accessible or convenient transport)
- Access to funding (e.g., denial of opportunity to participate in or benefit from government-funded programmes, services or benefit)
- Exclusion (e.g., inconvenient scheduling or insufficient time set aside for medical treatments or examinations)
- Stigma or lack of understanding of your disability/condition (e.g., stereotyping or assumptions about your needs and/or quality of life)
- Other (please state)
- None of the above

- I prefer not to say

**8B.** Please select one of the following that most closely describes your ethnic group or background.

- White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British
- White - Irish
- White - Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Any other white ethnic background
- Asian/Asian British - Bangladeshi
- Asian/Asian British - Chinese
- Asian/Asian British - Indian
- Asian/Asian British - Pakistani
- Any other Asian background
- Black/African/Caribbean/Black British
- Black African
- Black Caribbean
- Any other Black/African/Caribbean background
- Mixed/multiple ethnic groups - White and Asian
- Mixed/multiple ethnic groups - White and Black African
- Mixed/multiple ethnic groups - White and Black Caribbean
- Mixed/multiple ethnic groups - White mixed
- Any other mixed/multiple ethnic background
- Any other ethnic group - Arab
- Any other ethnic group - Latin American
- Any other ethnic group not listed above
- I prefer not to say

**9B.** Which of the following best describes the occupation of the main income earner in your household when you were 14 years of age?

- Traditional professional occupations, e.g., accountant, solicitor, medical practitioner, scientist, civil/mechanical engineer
- Modern professional occupations, e.g., teacher, nurse, physiotherapist, social worker, musician, police officer (sergeant or above), software designer
- Senior managers or administrators (usually responsible for planning, organising and coordinating work, and for finance), e.g., finance manager, chief executive
- Middle or junior managers, e.g., office manager, retail manager, bank manager, restaurant manager, warehouse manager
- Clerical and intermediate occupations, e.g., secretary, personal assistant,

clerical worker, call centre agent, nursery nurse

- Technical and craft occupations, e.g., motor mechanic, plumber, printer, electrician, gardener, train driver
- Semi-routine manual and service occupations, e.g., postal worker, machine operative, security guard, caretaker, farm worker, sales assistant, catering assistant
- Routine manual and service occupations, e.g., HGV driver, cleaner, porter, packer, labourer, waiter/waitress, bar staff
- Long-term unemployed (claimed Job Seekers' Allowance or earlier unemployment benefit for more than one year)
- Retired
- None of the above apply to me (please explain)
- I don't know
- I prefer not to say

**10B.** What is the highest level of educational qualification you have completed?

- No formal qualification
- Secondary school qualification (GCSE, O-level, NVQ level 2)
- Further education qualification (A-level, BTEC, NVQ level 3)
- Higher education qualification (College or university degree)
- Post-graduate qualification (Diploma, MSc/MA, PhD)
- Other (please state)
- I prefer not to say

## Block C

**1C.** Do you currently work as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector?

- Yes
- No

## Block D

(if the respondent does currently work in the creative and cultural sector)

**1D.** Which of the following best describes your current work status?

- I work only/mainly as a freelancer
- I combine freelance work with PAYE (paid employment in which your employer deducts tax and National Insurance contributions from your earnings, if applicable)
- None of the above apply to me (please describe your current work status and check whether you need to complete the survey using the definition of a freelancer above)

**2D.** In which of the following disciplines do you mainly work? If you work in multiple disciplines, please select all that apply.

- Combined arts (including carnival, spectacle, festivals, interdisciplinary and media arts, games, and game-based arts)
- Dance
- Libraries
- Literature
- Music, including opera
- Museums
- Theatre
- Visual arts (including crafts, design, media arts, photography, and sound arts)
- None of the above (please state the discipline you mainly work in)

**3D.** Which of the following best describes your freelance work in the creative and cultural sector? Please select all that apply.

- I work in a creative role
- I work in a technical role
- I work in an administrative role
- I work in a managerial role
- I work in a participation and/or engagement role
- I work in a creative and/or cultural education role
- I work in a front of house role
- Other. Please state

**4D.** What is your main reason for working as a freelancer?

**5D.** What are the main challenges you face as a freelancer? Please list up to three.

**6D.** How many years have you worked as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 21-25 years
- 26 years +

**7D.** Which of the following most closely describes your own view of your career stage?

- Early
- Mid
- Advanced

**8D.** Thinking just about the work you do that is connected to the creative and cultural sector, how many hours a week do you normally work on average? Please include all activities you would define as 'work' here, whether paid or unpaid, that relate to your work as a freelancer (e.g., administration, updating work-related social media, attending meetings, training, preparing, networking, completing funding applications, etc.).

- 0-5 hrs
- 6-10 hrs
- 11-15 hrs
- 16-20 hrs
- 21-25 hrs
- 26-30 hrs
- 31-35 hrs
- 36-40 hrs
- 41-48 hrs
- 48+ hrs
- Unable to say

**9D.** What percentage of your freelance work in the creative and cultural sector is UNPAID e.g., working above your budgeted hours?

- 91-100 %
- 81-90 %
- 71-80 %
- 61-70 %
- 51-60 %
- 41-50 %
- 31-40 %
- 21-30 %
- 11-20 %
- 0-10 %
- Unable to say
- I prefer not to say

**10D.** How regularly do your work hours negatively impact on your life outside of work?

- Always/almost always
- Very often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- Never/almost never
- I prefer not to say

**11D.** Over the past twelve months, has the work you are expected to do during your paid work hours ...?

- Increased
- Decreased
- Stayed the same
- Unable to say
- I prefer not to say



**12D.** Which of the following is closest to your pre-tax earnings from freelance work in the creative and cultural sector over the past 12 months?

- £0.00
- £1-5,000
- £5,001-£7,500
- £7,501-£10,000
- £10,001-£12,500
- £12,501-£15,000
- £15,001-£17,500
- £17,501-£20,000
- £20,001-£25,000
- £25,001-£30,000
- £30,001-£35,000
- £35,001-£40,000
- £40,001-£45,000
- £45,001-£50,000
- £50,001-£55,000
- £55,001-£60,000
- £60,001-£65,000
- £65,001-£70,000
- £70,001-£75,000
- £75,001-£80,000
- £80,001-£85,000
- £85,001-£90,000
- £90,001-£95,000
- £95,001-£100,000
- £100,000+
- I prefer not to say

**13D.** Thinking about your total income in 2022-23, approximately what **percentage** of your income came from the sources listed below?

- Freelance work in the creative and cultural sector
- Freelance work NOT in the creative and cultural sector
- PAYE employment in the creative and cultural sector
- PAYE employment NOT in the creative and cultural sector
- Other sources (please state)

**14D.** Over the past twelve months have you been offered freelance work in the creative and cultural sector with rates of pay that were lower than agreed union or industry rates?

- Always/almost always
- Very often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- Never/almost never
- Unable to say
- I prefer not to say

**15D.** If you have been offered freelance work below the agreed union or industry pay rates, did you accept all or any of this work?

- Yes - all
- Yes - some, but not all
- No
- Not applicable
- I prefer not to say

**16D.** For the work you do, do you consider yourself to be fairly paid?

- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to say

**17D.** Thinking about the work you are paid for. How often are you paid on time?

- Always/almost always
- Very often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- Never/almost never
- I prefer not to say

**18D.** In the last year, if you found yourself not earning enough money from freelance work in the creative and cultural sector to cover your living expenses (e.g., housing costs etc.), did you access any of the following? Please select all that apply.

- Benefit schemes
- Financial support from someone you know
- Income from employment/other paid work in a different sector (non-creative and cultural sector)
- Income from non-freelance employment/other paid work in the creative and cultural sector
- Savings
- Use of bank loans or other credit services
- Other forms of financial support (please state)
- This question does not apply to me
- I prefer not to say

**19D.** Have you been able to pay money into a pension or make financial provision for yourself if/when you retire? This relates to contributions you have made rather than those made by an employer.

- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to say

**20D.** What is your experience of applying for Arts Council England funding in the past 5 years? Please select all that apply.

- I have applied to National Lottery Project Grants and have been successful at least once
- I have applied to National Lottery Project Grants and have not been successful
- I have applied to Developing Your Creative Practice and have been successful at least once
- I have applied to Developing Your Creative Practice and have not been successful
- I have applied to the Emergency Recovery Fund and was successful
- I have applied to the Emergency Recovery Fund and was not successful
- I have never applied for Arts Council England funding
- I prefer not to say

**21D.** Why have you never applied for Arts Council funding? Please state the main reason why this is the case.

- I have not needed direct access to Arts Council funding (e.g., as a grant holder)
- I did not apply because I did not think I would be successful
- Completing an application is too difficult/time-consuming
- Other reasons (please state)
- I prefer not to say

## Block E

(if the respondent does not currently work in the creative and cultural sector)

**1E.** Which discipline did you work in most recently? If you worked in multiple disciplines, please select all that apply.

- Dance
- Libraries
- Literature
- Music, including opera
- Museums
- Theatre
- Visual arts (including crafts, design, media arts, photography, and sound arts)
- None of the above. Please state the discipline you mainly worked in.

**2E.** Which of the following best describes the freelance work you did? Please select all that apply.

- I worked in a creative role
- I worked in a technical role
- I worked in an administrative role
- I worked in a managerial role
- I worked in a participation and/or engagement role
- I worked in a creative and/or cultural education role
- I worked in a front of house role
- Other. Please describe

**3E.** For how many years did you work as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 year
- 16-20 years
- 21-25 years
- 26 years +

**4E.** In what year did you stop working as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector?

**5E.** What was your main reason for stopping work as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector?

**6E.** Thinking about your current work, which of the statements below best describe your situation? If you hold multiple positions, please select all that apply.

- I am employed part-time in the creative and cultural sector (less than 16 hours per week, on average)
- I am employed full-time NOT in the creative and cultural sector (more than 16 hours per week, on average)
- I am employed part-time NOT in the creative and cultural sector (less than 16 hours per week, on average)
- I work freelance in another sector (NOT the creative and cultural sector)
- I am not currently working
- Other (please state)
- None of the above apply to me
- I prefer not to say

**7E.** How likely do you think it is that you will work as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector again in the future?

- Very likely
- Quite likely
- Quite unlikely

- Very unlikely
- Unable to say
- I prefer not to say

**8E.** What would need to change for you to expect to be still working as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector in the future?

## Block F

**1F.** How confident are you about being able to negotiate fair contractual terms and conditions for the freelance work you do?

- Very confident
- Quite confident
- Not very confident
- Not at all confident
- I prefer not to say

**2F.** If you selected 'not very' or 'not at all' confident, please tell us who or where you might seek advice from.

**3F.** Do you feel that in your working life as a freelancer, you have had opportunities to develop your career (e.g., expand your work experiences, learn additional skills, increase your earning capacity)?

- A lot
- A little
- Not very much
- Not at all
- This question does not apply to me
- I prefer not to say

**4F.** Thinking about your work in the creative and cultural sector, how do you find out about suitable work opportunities? Please select all that apply.

- Advertisements
- Personal recommendations

- Direct approaches via email and/or social media
- Through my agent
- Repeat bookings
- Other (please state)
- I prefer not to say

**5F.** Are you currently a member of a union?

- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to say

**6F.** When working as a freelancer, do you feel you have access to supervision, advice, mentoring and/or support if/when you feel you need it?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable
- I prefer not to say

**7F.** Which, if any, of the following would you like more support, training, or access to relevant advice on? Please select all that apply.

**8F.** In your experience, how inclusive do you think the creative and cultural sector currently is?

- Very inclusive
- Fairly inclusive
- Not very inclusive
- Not at all inclusive
- Unable to say
- I prefer not to say

**9F.** Have you experienced any of the following in the past 12 months? Please select all that apply.

- Concerns about your job/contractual insecurity

- Experiences of discrimination, harassment and/or victimisation
- Financial concerns/uncertainty
- Overwork (having more work than you can cope with or are paid to do)
- Underwork (not having enough paid work to provide the income you need)
- Work commitments having a negative impact on your personal life
- Worries about the ongoing impact of BREXIT on your working life
- Worries about the ongoing impact of COVID-19, or a recurrence of COVID-19 or similar
- Worries about your work environment or circumstances
- Your working hours/commitments making it difficult to be a parent and/or carer.
- Other (Please describe)
- None of the above
- I prefer not to say

**10F.** How likely do you think it is that you will be still working as a freelancer in three years' time?

- Very likely
- Quite likely
- Quite unlikely
- Very unlikely
- Unable to say/not sure
- I prefer not to say

**11F.** What would need to change for you to expect to be still working as a freelancer in the arts/cultural sector in three years' time?

**12F.** Current research raises concerns over skills shortages in certain areas of the creative and cultural sector. Which of the following reflect your own views and experiences? Please select all that apply.

- There is a significant skills shortage in my sector
- There is a significant shortage of appropriately experienced workers in my sector
- My work has been affected by skills and personnel shortages in my sector
- There were problems in my sector (e.g., post-COVID), but these have now been resolved
- There are currently no problems in my sector, but I expect there to be in future
- There are no skills/personnel shortages in my own sector, but I am aware that



this is an issue in other sectors

- I am not aware of any skills/personnel problems in the sector
- I prefer not to say

**13F.** Thinking about the past 12 months, have you experienced any of the following?

- I have been asked/required to take on more work than I am being paid for or work that is outside of my agreed contractual terms
- I have been asked/required to take on more work than I can do in the hours I am being paid for
- I have been asked/required to take on work that I do not have relevant skills/qualifications for
- I have been asked/required to take on work that I do not have relevant experience/expertise for
- I have been asked/required to take on work that I would prefer not to do
- None of the above apply to me
- I prefer not to say

**14F.** How likely would you be to recommend working as a freelancer in the creative and cultural sector?

- Very likely
- Quite likely
- Quite unlikely
- Very unlikely
- Unable to say/not sure
- I prefer not to say

# Appendix Two

## Focus Groups

### Pilot Focus Groups<sup>8</sup>

Pilot Group 1	Participating Freelancers: 6
Pilot Group 2	Participating Freelancers: 6

### Regional Focus Groups<sup>9</sup>

Focus Group 1 – London	Participating Freelancers: 5
Focus Group 2 – Midlands	Participating Freelancers: 5
Focus Group 3 – North	Participating Freelancers: 5
Focus Group 4 – South East	Participating Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 5 – South West	Participating Freelancers: 5

### Career-stage Focus Groups

Focus Group 6 – Early Career	Participating Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 7 – Mid Career	Participating Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 8 – Advanced Career	Participating Freelancers: 6

### Discipline-based Focus Groups

Focus Group 9 – Combined Arts	Participating Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 10 – Music	Participating Freelancers: 5
Focus Group 11 – Theatre	Participating Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 12 – Dance	Participating Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 13 – Libraries	Participating Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 14 – Museums	Participating Freelancers: 5
Focus Group 15 – Literature	Participating Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 16 – Visual Arts	Participating Freelancers: 5

## Focus groups with those who were unable or unwilling to fill out the survey, but who volunteered to take part in a focus group and/or interview

<sup>8</sup> Pilot focus group participants were asked to provide feedback on the questions and interview process after their sessions. Participants for these pilot groups were recruited through our existing professional networks.

<sup>9</sup> All participating freelancers in Groups 1-16 were recruited via the survey.

Focus Group 17 – Non-survey Respondents	Participating Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 18 – Non-survey Respondents	Participating Freelancers: 6

### Focus groups where early survey analysis indicated the need for further research<sup>10</sup>

Focus Group 19 – Neurodiverse Freelancers	Participating Freelancers: 5
Focus Group 20 – Disabled Freelancers	Participating Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 21 – Freelance Leavers 1 <sup>11</sup>	Participating (former) Freelancers: 6
Focus Group 22 – Freelance Leavers 2 <sup>12</sup>	Participating (former) Freelancers: 3
Focus Group 23 – Freelancer Leaders <sup>13</sup>	Participating Freelancers: 5
Focus Group 24 – Working-class Freelancers	Participating Freelancers: 4
Focus Group 25 – Parents/Carers Freelancers	Participating Freelancers: 6

**Total Focus Groups: 27**

**Total Participants: 147**

10 All participants in focus groups 19-25 were recruited via the survey. One participant in the Freelance Leaders group had already contributed to one of the discipline-based focus groups but was asked back (due to a short notice cancellation).

11 Those who left freelance work but remained in the creative and cultural sector.

12 Those who left freelance work and also left the creative and cultural sector.

13 Those who employ other freelancers.

## Appendix Three

Appendix Three provides full details of all focus group and interview participants.

Table 1: Age breakdown of 200 focus group and interview participants.

Age Range	Participants	Percentage
20-29	34	17%
30-39	49	24.5%
40-49	45	22.5%
50-59	49	24.5%
60-69	18	9%
70-79	1	0.5%
80-89	1	0.5%
Undeclared	3	1.5%

Table 2: Gender identification of 200 focus group and interview participants.

Gender	Participants	Percentage
Female	109	54.5%
Male	63	31.5%
Non-binary	24	12%
I prefer to use other language	3	1.5%
Undeclared	1	0.5%

Table 3: Sexuality of 200 focus group and interview participants.

Sexuality	Participants	Percentage
Bisexual	22	11%
Gay Man	14	7%
Gay Woman	6	3%
Heterosexual/Straight	110	55%
Queer	23	11.5%
Pansexual	5	2.5%
Undeclared	20	10%

Table 4: Number of focus group and interview participants identifying as a deaf or disabled, or with a long-term health condition.

Answer	Participants	Percentage
Yes	73	36.5%
No	118	59%
Prefer not to say	2	1%
Undeclared	7	3.5%

Table 5: Focus group and interview participants with caring responsibilities.

Caring for	Participant	Percentage
Pre-school age children	8	4%
School age children	36	18%
Older children (beyond school age)	17	8.5%
Spouse / partner	6	3%
Parents or other relatives / kin	31	15.5%
Any other caring and/or parenting responsibilities	5	2.5%
Caring - unspecified	3	1.5%
None of the above	106	53%
Undeclared	4	2%

Table 6: Ethnicity of 200 focus group and interview participants

Ethnicity	Participants	Percentage
White -English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	93	46.5%
White – Gypsy or Irish Traveller	1	0.5%
White – Irish	4	2%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups – White mixed	6	3%
Any other white ethnic background	21	10.5%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups – White and Asian	9	4.5%
Asian/Asian British – Indian	9	4.5%
Asian/Asian British – Pakistani	4	2%
Asian/Asian British – Bangladeshi	1	0.5%
Asian/Asian British – Chinese	2	1%
Any other Asian background	4	2%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	7	3.5%
Black African	5	2.5%
Black Caribbean	1	0.5%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups – White and Black Caribbean	6	3%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups – White and Black African	3	1.5%
Any other mixed/multiple ethnic background	12	6%
Arab	1	0.5%
Latin American	4	2%
Any other ethnic group	5	2.5%
Undeclared	2	1%

